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ARGOSY

WEEKLY

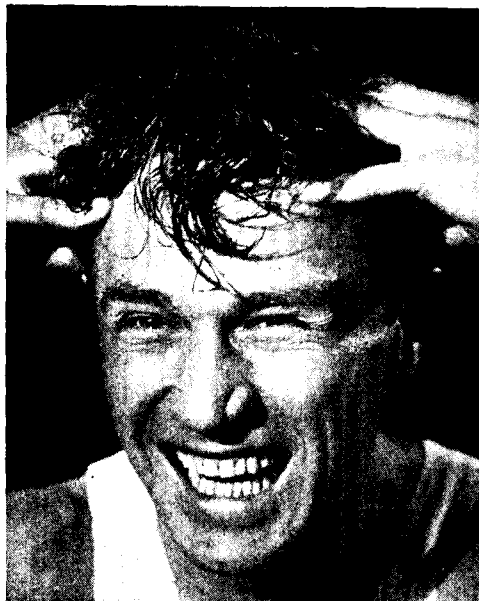
Smooth Kyle Returns!

*To beat the Bunds and
smash the Swastika
To make America safe for Americans*

**The
Sun Sets at 5**
by Borden Chase



Good News! for **DANDRUFF SUFFERERS**



Listerine Antiseptic Treatment Fights Infectious Dandruff Clinical Tests Showed Marked Improvement in 76% of Cases

If you are troubled with infectious dandruff, give Listerine Antiseptic a chance to prove how helpful it can be...how quickly it attacks the infection and those humiliating scales...how fresh, clean, and invigorated it makes your scalp feel. Users everywhere acclaim its benefits.

The treatment is as easy as it is delightful. Just douse the scalp, morning and night, with full strength Listerine Antiseptic — the same Listerine Antiseptic that has been famous for 25 years as a mouth wash and gargle. Massage hair and scalp vigorously and persistently. In clinical tests, dandruff sufferers were delighted to find that this treatment brought rapid improvement in most cases.

Kills Bottle Bacillus

Dandruff is the most frequent scaly disease of the scalp. When this condition is due to germs, as is often the case, Listerine is especially fitted to aid you. It gives the scalp and hair a cooling and invigorating antiseptic bath...kills millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff, including *Pityrosporum Ovale*. This strange "bottle bacillus" is recognized by outstanding dandruff specialists as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

Improvement in 76% of Test Cases

Rabbits inoculated with *Pityrosporum Ovale* developed definite dandruff symptoms which disappeared shortly after being treated with Listerine Antiseptic daily.

And in a dandruff clinic, 76% of the men and women who used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice a day showed complete disappearance of or marked improvement in the symptoms of dandruff within 30 days.

Don't Delay. Use Listerine Now

If you are troubled with dandruff, don't neglect what may be a real infection. Start with Listerine Antiseptic and massage right now — delay may aggravate the trouble. It's the method that has demonstrated its usefulness in a substantial majority of test cases.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., St. Louis, Mo.

THE TREATMENT

MEN: Douse full strength Listerine Antiseptic on the scalp morning and night. **WOMEN:** Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic right along the part with a medicine dropper, to avoid wetting the hair excessively.

Always follow with vigorous and persistent massage with fingers or a good hair brush. Continue the treatment so long as dandruff is in evidence. And even though you're free from dandruff, enjoy a Listerine massage once a week to guard against infection.

Genuine Listerine Antiseptic is guaranteed not to bleach the hair or affect texture.



Why Trained Accountants Command

—and how ambitious men are qualifying
by the La Salle Problem Method

High Salaries

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes and interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures where-with he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to use these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of

LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. He became auditor for a large bank with an income 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at \$30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income several times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning \$200 a month—moved up quickly to \$3000, to \$5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which netted around \$10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you may equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

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If you are dissatisfied with your present equipment—if you recognize the opportunities that lie ahead of you through home-study training—you will do well to send at once for full particulars. The coupon will bring them to you without any obligation, also details of LaSalle's convenient payment plan.

Check, sign and mail the coupon NOW.

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Opportunities in Accountancy—Check below and we will send you a copy of "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays," without obligation.

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| ☐ Credit and Collection | ☐ Effective Speaking |
| ☐ Correspondence | ☐ Railway Accounting |

Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

*Names available on request.

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

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Cover by Rudolph Belarski

Illustrating The Sun Sets at Five

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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WILLIAM I DEWART President

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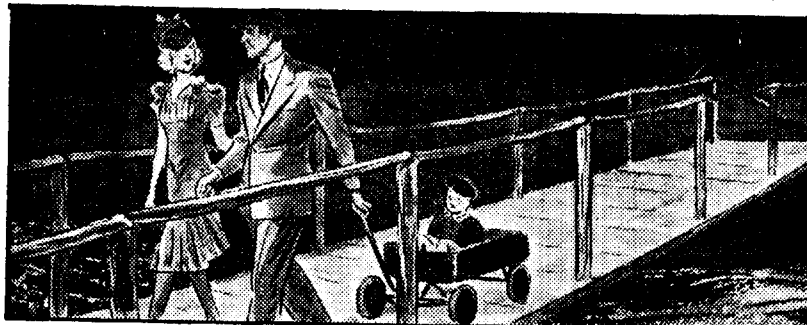
111 Rue Réaumur

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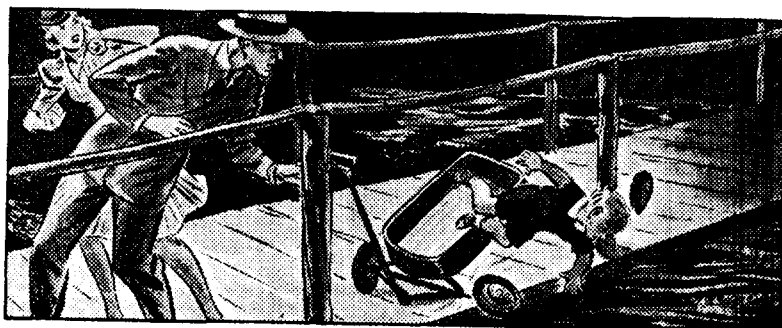
"BLACK, SWIRLING WATERS SWALLOWED OUR BABY!"

A true experience of GEORGE W. HOYT, Litchfield, Mich.



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2. "SUDDENLY A WHEEL came off the wagon, hurling our baby into the black, swirling waters of the river. Luckily I had my flashlight with me. I switched it on as I jumped over the railing. Despite a thorough soaking, that light did not fail me.



3. "ITS BRIGHT, faithful beam disclosed my boy clinging to the branches of a floating tree! Those dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries helped save our little boy's life. I will never be without them in my flashlight!

NOTE: An "Eveready" flashlight with "Eveready" batteries, will normally continue to burn under water.

(Signed) *George W. Hoyt*

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Co., Inc.



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1 STARTS YOU TIES
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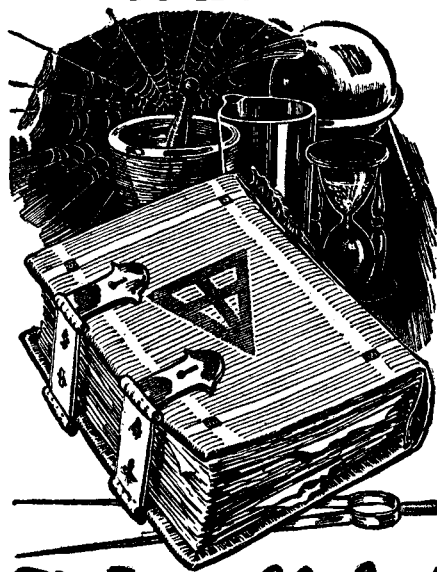
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The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization), an age-old brotherhood of learning, have preserved this secret wisdom in their archives for centuries. They now invite you to share the practical helpfulness of their teachings. Write today for a free copy of the book, "The Secret Heritage." Within its pages may lie a new life of opportunity for you. Address Scribe H.J.A.

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When you can get for 35 cents a safe, efficient and harmless stimulant and diuretic that should flush from your kidneys the waste matter, poisons and acid that are now doing you harm, why continue to break your restful sleep by getting up through the night?

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EST. 1868

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Copr. 1940,
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For Sickness

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For Accidents

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COSTS ONLY \$1 PER MONTH

The "Security" Sickness and Accident Policy gives your family quick cash when income is stopped. Pays CASH protection of \$25.00 a week up to ten weeks for accident—\$25.00 each week for sickness, as specified in policy—and up to \$8,000.00 for accidental death, loss of hands, eyes or feet. Also other liberal features. Examine this new Security Policy on our 10-day Free Inspection Offer!

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Any person may apply. Ages 16 to 75, man or woman. No physical examination. The Security Policy sold by mail. No agent will call. The Arcadia Mutual Casualty Company is a safe company—not an association or assessment company. It has the approval of the Illinois State Insurance Department.

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THE ARCADIA MUTUAL CASUALTY CO., Desk 28-B 75 East Wacker Drive, Chicago, Ill. **NO AGENT WILL CALL**

Please send me complete information and tell me how I may get the "Security" Policy for 10-day Free Inspection without obligation.

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In answering advertisements it is desirable that you mention ARGOSY



The Sun Sets at 5



Here's a job for a man—a man wiser than Solomon and smarter than Disraeli, a man as brave as two lions and as tough as a dozen iron spikes. Smooth Kyle may not quite fit the part, but he's willing to break his neck trying because the crawling thing that's stirring over the face of the nation, trying to drag it into bloody holocaust, has got to be smashed! . . . The hard-fisted graduate of Hell's Kitchen will be assisted in the débacle by Gilda Garland, the Lady with the Haymaker

By BORDEN CHASE

Author of "Blue, White—and Perfect," "Sandhog," etc.

CHAPTER I

POSIES FOR THE PRESIDENT

"**U**ND so I say to you, the time is close! *Der Tag!* Wait *und* be ready. Then, *meine guter Freunde*, you shall see many changes. Changes that will throw out of Washington dis enemy of our people. Oh, yes! We will take care of President *Rosenfeld*. Very nicely we will take care of him. He doesn't like for our Fuehrer to put people into consendration camps? No? That is too bad. But maybe he doesn't like it much when *he* is in a consendration camp. *Und* that is where he goes!"

The speaker paused to rest one fat hand upon the table. He took a large, flaring handkerchief from his pocket and wiped moisture from his face. Glaring Smooth Kyle measured the dis-

tance from his chair to the platform.

About twenty feet. There were six rows of chairs in the way. It might take a little rough work to get through. But the platform was only four feet above the floor of the hall. And the speaker was about six foot two—just a nice height for a looping right hook. Smooth drew a deep breath and braced his feet.

"Relax," said Inspector McNeary.

"A dollar gets you twenty I drop him with the first punch."

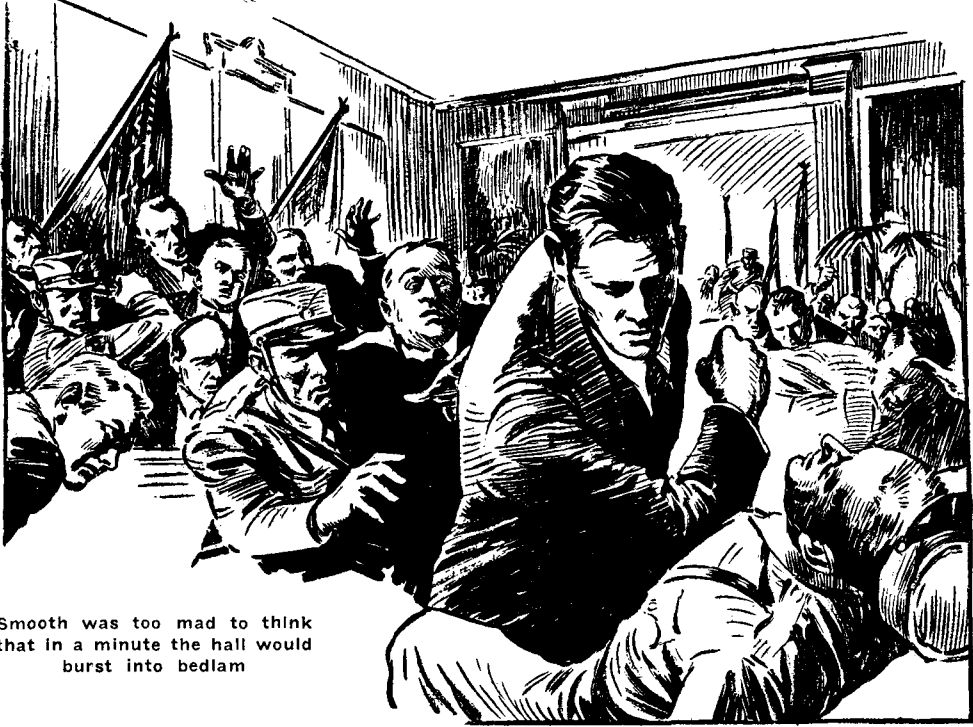
"And then what?"

Smooth looked along the rows of faces that were turned toward the platform. Hard faces, most of them. Square jawed men with eager eyes. Waiting for *der Tag*.

"And then," said Smooth, "anything can happen."

McNeary smiled. "This crowd has

*A Gripping Novel of a Crusade That Never
Made the Headlines—and of a Battle in
the Dark to Preserve the American Way*



Smooth was too mad to think
that in a minute the hall would
burst into bedlam

already sent ten men into hospitals."

"So what?"

"You wouldn't be much help to the government in a hospital. Sit back and relax."

It was an order.

And Smooth Kyle had worked in the Treasury Department long enough to know Inspector McNeary's orders had to be obeyed. He leaned back in his chair, folded his arms and listened. The heavy-faced speaker went on with his speech. Time and again he called the President out of his name. Laughed at him. Reviled him.

There would come a day, he promised, when America would be purged of all such men. The Fuehrer would deliver his people. He would rule!

And the crowd roared: "*Sieg Heil!*"

SMOOTH felt the veins in his forehead grow taut. His mouth was dry and his teeth ached from the pressure of his jaw. He leaned close to McNeary. "Sorry, chief," he said. "I can't take it."

"No?" said McNeary.

"One more crack from that guy and Mrs. Kyle's little boy is going to be in the middle of an argument. Maybe we'd better get out."

McNeary's smile was grim. He nodded, got quietly to his feet and stepped into the aisle. Smooth followed. No one spoke to them as they walked to the rear of the long hall. No one looked at them. Each face was turned toward the speaker on the platform. Each member of the audience waited expectantly for his next cue. . . . They reached the door.

"*Sieg Heil!*" roared the crowd.

Smooth put a hand against the door. Started to push it open toward the street. A heavy-shouldered man stepped to his side. His jaw was thrust forward and his eye were cold.

"*Nein!*" he said sharply. "It is not permitted to leave when the Leader speaks. You vill sit down—both of you!"

"Look, Oscar," said Smooth gently. "I've got a tender stomach. Sometimes I get dizzy spells. I'm getting one now. Be nice, Oscar—be nice and get out of the way!"

"You vill sit down!" said the guard.

"You're making it very tough for me, Oscar."

"Sit down!"

Smooth sent it across. A looping right hook that came from nowhere and landed flush against the guard's jaw. It was one of those punches that are kept under wraps until anger has built the force of an explosion in it. The guard didn't go down. Not on the instant. His shoulders slammed against the wall and his head jerked forward. Then he fell, loosely, like a sack of fish dropped from a truck.

"I might have expected that," said McNeary. He grabbed Smooth's shoulder. "Get going! Fast!"

"Can't we stay for just one dance?" asked Smooth.

"Outside!"

The hall was filled with angry voices. Men were coming down the aisles. Climbing over benches. It would have been fun while it lasted. Smooth saw a dozen jaws carefully designed by nature to stop a right hook. That was Smooth's Sunday punch. He wanted to try it just once more before he left. McNeary had other ideas.

He was a small man, McNeary. Even smaller than Smooth who was

only average in height. But there was strength in his arms and he used it now as he pushed Smooth toward the street. A passing cab swung in toward the curb. McNeary gestured and the cab stopped.

"Climb in," said McNeary. He opened the door. "Do you think I brought you all the way from San Francisco to trade punches with mugs?"

"Maybe not," said Smooth. He stepped into the cab. "But I still think it was a swell idea."

THE door slammed and the cab rolled. Smooth turned to look from the rear window. Men were pouring out of the hall. Angry men. They stood at the curb and shook their fists at the speeding cab. Some ran after it, shouting. The traffic light was red but the driver jumped it. He half turned to look over his shoulder.

"What's the matter, Smooth?" he asked. "Ferget t'pay yer dues in the group?"

"Come again," said Smooth. "Your voice is familiar but I don't recognize the back of your neck."

"Shorty O'Connell," said the driver. "Used to push a hack with you in the old days."

"Right," said Smooth. "You were on the line in front of the old Continental—Forty-first and Broadway."

Smooth was home again now. The years fell away and he remembered the tough little Irishman. The wild days when Broadway woke up at midnight and went to bed at sunrise. Prohibition. Days when a hundred heavy-fisted bootleggers had tossed their money across night-club tables. When hard-faced women in glittering gowns had greeted each newcomer with a laugh and, "Hello, Sucker!"

Smooth remembered. The days. The nights. Wild, crazy ones when a hackman never knew how many murderers might step into his cab, point a gun at his neck and say: "Get rollin', Johnny! I want a fast ride and no questions!"

Times Square had been Smooth's private office. Seated on the front end of a hack, Smooth had rolled 'em hard and rolled 'em fast, grabbing the nickels and dimes on Broadway. Then he had met Inspector McNeary.

The two men had clicked. And Smooth had signed up as a Treasury Department agent. Hard work. Years of it. Work that had taken him into every corner of the world and finally landed him in San Francisco. Then a message from McNeary to come to New York. A meeting at the airport and a quick ride to Yorkville. The group meeting. And now, after all these years Shorty O'Connell, one of the old crowd, was driving him across East Eighty-sixth Street toward Broadway.

SMOOTH grinned. Almost, it was as though some rare old girl whose life had been lived at a terrific pace, had suddenly called it a day. She had put away her evening gowns, wiped the mascara from her lashes and decided to join the church.

But Smooth Kyle still knew her heart. He'd been part of it. So had the man who drove this cab. Both knew the real New York. No matter what had changed on the surface, there was still the same swift undercurrent of danger, hatred, love, and excitement flowing through the dark streets that fan out from Times Square. And now Smooth was home again. Home to do what? He wished he knew.

"That your first group meeting?" asked McNeary.

"Yes."

"But you've read about them?"

"It isn't the same in print."

"Perhaps you're right," said McNeary. He leaned forward to speak to the driver. "Over to the West Side Highway and down to the Customs House. Make it fast."

Smooth studied the back of his hand. One knuckle was bruised and he rubbed it. Then he glanced at McNeary. The inspector had changed little. Same gaunt lines along his jaw. Same iron gray hair. One thing was different.

McNeary's eyes carried a troubled look. Two creases had grown between his brows. They were deep as he looked from the window of the speeding cab.

"What's it all about?" asked Smooth. "Something big?"

"Very."

"Narcotics?"

"No."

"Counterfeiting?"

"Worse," said McNeary. "We've got a war on our hands."

"Huh?" said Smooth. He looked quickly at the older man. "Aren't you a little mixed, chief? Europe has the war—not us."

"We've got one of our own that's as bad as the mess in Europe. That's why you've been called back to New York. That's why we attended that meeting."

"So I don't get it."

"You will when we get downtown," said the inspector. He turned to look sharply at Smooth. "While we're alone I've got a few personal questions."

"About Gilda?"

"Where is she, Smooth?"

"Right here in New York. Last time she wrote, she said something about opening a dress shop on Madison Avenue."

McNeary shook his head. There was

weariness in the gesture. He put one hand on Smooth's knee. "I've never been able to decide which of you is crazy," he said. "Gilda insists she won't marry you until you quit the Treasury service. And I have to admit her reasons are good."

"Good?" said Smooth quickly. "What's good about them?"

"We both know the answer to that. Gilda loves you."

"So?"

"She also knows you're an idiot."

"Wait a minute, chief! I'm not going to—"

"And she's right," McNeary continued. "You should have been dead five years ago. Lord knows how you've kept alive. I don't. But I do know the law of averages will catch up with you someday. A man can't keep on living through the chances you take, Smooth."

"What chances?" said Smooth. "I haven't spent a week in the hospital since I've been on the government payroll. Well— not many weeks, anyway. I'm just like any other agent. The office gives me a job and I do it. It's not my fault if some chump tries to shoot it out in an alley. I don't go around looking for fights, Mac."

The inspector laughed. "Of course not, Smooth. It's just coincidence that fifty percent of your cases wind up in the coroner's office instead of the law courts. Gilda knows that. So do I."

"Sure," said Smooth. "Just coincidence."

The inspector gave a good horse laugh. Smooth decided not to argue. McNeary had the figures. Fifty percent seemed a little high, but if it was even close there wasn't much point to further talk.

Besides, McNeary was Gilda's friend. Always had been, even when Gilda was on the wrong side of the

law. There had been a time when the tall blond girl with the wise eyes had been slated for a jail term. McNeary had blocked that. He'd given Gilda Garland a chance to prove she could use those keen wits on the right side of the law. And Gilda had never forgotten.

"Does she know you're in town?" asked McNeary.

"Not yet. My instructions were to tell no one."

"That didn't cover Gilda. Phone her when we get finished downtown. Tell her you'll see her tonight."

"Maybe it won't be that easy. Gilda's been writing about Dave Haley in most of her letters. She'll probably be out making the rounds with him."

"You mean Haley the columnist?"

"As far as I know, the one and only Dave Haley. Sees all, tells everything. Syndicated from New York to Manchukuo. On the air coast to coast."

"Do you know him?"

"Never met the guy and never want to."

"You couldn't by any chance, be a little jealous of Dave Haley?"

"Nuts!"

"No need to get tough about it," said McNeary. He grinned and looked out over the gray waters of the Hudson River. "It was merely a routine question."

CHAPTER II

THE LADY AND THE BOMB-SIGHT

FOR a time they rode in silence. The cab twisted along the highway, slipping between the gleaming fenders of private cars with scant inches to spare as the hackman tried for speed. Traffic grew as they reached the midtown ramps. Smooth welcomed it. He liked the sweep and surge that was part of the city. Liked the shouted argu-

ments between the cab drivers. This was his town. He was home.

"About the group," he said at length. "Why doesn't the Department of Justice knock that bunch wide open?"

"It's a free country," said McNeary.

"Free? Because it's free do we have to let a flannel mouthed Nazi stand up there and make cracks about the President? What do you suppose would happen to me if I hired a hall in Berlin and talked about Hitler?"

"This is New York—not Berlin."

"That still doesn't make it right. All that stuff about concentration camps—we don't have to listen to that."

"You're right, Smooth. We don't."

"They why listen?"

"Because," said McNeary quietly, "it gives the Nazi organizers an opportunity to gather their sympathizers together in one unit. That unit is called the group. It's supposed to be a patriotic organization. Hundred percent American."

"And you're trying to tell me the Department falls for that?"

"No, but the groupmen do," said the inspector. "They attend meetings and pay dues. They also hold membership cards and put their names and addresses on record in the group's books."

"And we—"

"We," said McNeary, "think it is very nice of them to provide us with such a record. It might come in handy in the event of war . . ."

Smooth followed the inspector along the halls of the old gray building in Bowling Green. They opened a door marked *Treasury Department*, nodded to the clerk on duty and stepped into a large office whose windows looked out over the Upper Bay. Three men were seated near a flat-topped desk. Smooth knew one—Don Buckley of the Depart-

ment of Justice. He nodded and the gray-haired agent put out his hand.

"Glad to see you again, Smooth," he said. He motioned toward a thin, hook-nosed man beside him. "This is Jed Whitman, one of the old-timers in the Secret Service." Smooth shook hands with Whitman and Buckley motioned toward the third man. "This is Professor Strickland. He's acting as coordinator for the three branches of service."

"Glad to know you, professor," said Smooth.

Strickland wagged his head wisely and said, "I'd like a report on the work you've been doing. Your last case."

Smooth glanced at McNeary. The inspector nodded. The others turned to look at the man who had cracked some of the toughest cases ever handled by the Department. Smooth lit his cigarette, drew deep and watched the smoke drift toward the ceiling.

"**B**RIEFLY," he said, "I've been chasing hundred-dollar bills half way around the world. We got word that someone was flooding the market with counterfeit. Stuff that was so perfect it would fool almost any teller. It was coming from Europe—and in big chunks. Officially, we've never been able to prove it, but the trail led straight to Moscow."

"I heard something about that in Washington," said Professor Strickland. "I thought it had all been stopped some years ago."

"Officially stopped," said Smooth. "But we wanted the plates and the man who made them. We also wanted to get any of the bills that were still being offered for sale."

"Did you get the bills?"

"Most of them."

"And the plates?"

"I couldn't get them out of Russia so I destroyed them."

"What about the engraver?"

Smooth grinned. "Too bad about Borodov—not a bad guy. I tried to get him out of Russia, too. He didn't want to leave."

"So?"

McNeary coughed. "Er—I'm afraid Borodov met with an unfortunate accident, professor. He was reported to be rather a dangerous character. Very handy with a gun."

"Was he?" asked Strickland.

"He was a darn good engraver," said Smooth quietly.

Professor Strickland seated himself behind the desk. He reached for a scratch pad and drew an intricate series of designs. He studied them for a time then looked up at Smooth.

"Because of the seriousness of this case, I've asked Inspector McNeary to give me his best man," he said at length. "He suggested you. I then consulted with Buckley and Whitman. They agree you are the man for this job. But before we go any further I want you to understand we can have no more of these unfortunate accidents. Not on this case!"

"Why, professor?" said Smooth. His eyebrows went up. "You don't mean to insinuate that I—"

"I'm not insinuating," said Strickland. "I've looked at the records and I know the results. Your method of solving a case seems to follow a very simple pattern—trouble starts as soon as you take over. It gets worse as the days go by. Finally someone decides to get rid of you. He goes after a gun and the case is marked closed."

"I'M afraid someone has been talking behind my back," said Smooth innocently. "I admit I've never had much

luck with deduction. But you can't call it my fault if a counterfeiter or a dope-peddler tries to wing me and misses."

McNeary chuckled. Buckley turned to look out of the window. Whitman took a pipe from his pocket and examined the bowl carefully. The phone rang and Professor Strickland lifted the receiver. His answers were short and when he hung up, he seemed to be having trouble with his lower lip.

"One of our men has just reported on that meeting in Yorkville," he said slowly. "It seems there was some sort of disturbance. I asked McNeary to have you listen to the speeches, Kyle. Did you notice any disturbance while you were there?"

"Disturbances?" said Smooth. He glanced at the back of his right hand. "No—things seemed to be going nicely when we left."

"No fights?"

"Oh, you'd hardly call it a fight, professor."

Strickland shook his pencil at Smooth. "Get this straight, Kyle! We all feel the same way you do about that crowd. We'd all like to go up there and toss a few punches. But that's out! The game we're playing now is too big for personal feelings. None of us is as important as the lives of a million American soldiers. We don't count. Our feelings don't count. And that goes double for you!"

"I don't get it," said Smooth. "Just what is this job of ours, professor?"

"Simply this," said Strickland. "Every important nation of the world has an espionage system at work here in the United States. Many of the agents are known to us. In the natural course of events our counter-espionage system could handle the situation nicely. But recently we've discovered that one nation has developed a network in this

country above and beyond the wildest dreams of any sane man. There are active units in every large city from New York to San Francisco. Other groups work in the smaller cities. All of them are getting orders from a governing committee which is headed by one man."

"And you want me to get this man?" asked Smooth.

"Yes."

"What country does he work for?"

Strickland frowned. "Until he tells us the answer, I can't say. But recently two great countries have formed an alliance. One of these countries has always advocated the overthrow of all democracies. It has established cells and units in the United States and made thousands of converts. It is reasonable to suppose these same cells are capable of espionage work."

He paused and studied the tip of his pencil. "The other country was once our enemy. It believes in the ruthless extermination of minorities—racial and religious. Twenty-five years ago its agents started a wave of sabotage in this country that cost thousands of lives and millions of dollars. We were neutral then. We're neutral now. *We* don't think this former enemy of ours has changed its ways. Do I make myself clear, Kyle?"

"Very clear," said Smooth. "Just how does the group figure in this?"

"It's a front," said Strickland impatiently. "It makes a lot of noise and could be used in event of war to do some strong-arm work. Actually, it isn't important. Not nearly so important as its parent organization would have us believe. It's the old red-herring game. They give us something to hate. Something to watch.

"We appoint Congressional committees to investigate the group and all

we learn is what we already know. But behind it, are other men. Crafty men. Men who work in silence and plan ruin for the United States. You never see their names in the newspapers. No Congressional committee ever questions them.

"And why? Because they are the brains. They know how to keep hidden. And all of them take orders, we believe, from *one* man!"

"My job is to get him?"

"Yes."

"Have you got anything to go on? Anything to start me rolling?"

Strickland motioned to the Secret Service man. "Whitman," he said. "I want you to put Kyle up to date."

"That won't take long," said the thin man. He rubbed the side of his nose, thoughtfully. "We've run down a thousand leads and landed exactly nowhere. So have Buckley and his men. Now we've got a new one—just a tip. Nothing definite. But it may be a start for you, Kyle."

"Let's have it."

"Ever hear of the Club Yvonne?"

"Here in New York?"

"Yes."

"Must be after my time."

"It's about three years old. Man by the name of Jacques Boville runs it."

"I remember Boville," said Smooth. "Used to be a bootlegger in the old days. Always out to make a dollar."

"**BOVILLÉ** may be in the clear," said Whitman. "We haven't anything on him. As a matter of fact, we haven't anything but a wish on Marie Roubard."

"Who is Marie Roubard?"

"An orchestra leader. She's got a band in the Club Yvonne."

"And you think she's one of the Nazis?"

Strickland lifted his hand. "We think she's one of the group taking orders from the man we are trying to locate."

"My error," said Smooth. He grinned. "Is there any more dope on her? Is she a citizen? Married? What sort of dame is she?"

"She's not a dame!" said Strickland. "Marie Roubard is a highly educated young lady. She was born in Alsace-Lorraine twenty-two years ago. Came to this country eight years back and is now a citizen."

"And that's all you know about her?"

"Not quite all," said Strickland. He turned to the Secret Service man. "Let's have the rest of it."

"We've been watching this Marie Roubard for the past six months," said Whitman. "She lives in an apartment on Fiftieth Street not far from the Club Yvonne. We got our first lead when one of our men found a letter addressed to her. He picked it up in the hair dresser's shop on the *Bremen*. You probably remember that case."

"I read something about it in the Paris newspapers," said Smooth. "Small-time stuff, wasn't it? Some kid in the army trying to hire out as a foreign spy?"

"That's what got into print. Actually there was a good deal more. As a result of that case we learned of the organization Professor Strickland mentioned. We also learned some of the things this organization hopes to accomplish."

"Such as?"

"Complete espionage work," said Whitman. "Maps and detailed information of our military defenses. Plans for the paralysis of our key cities in the event of war—New York, for instance. The city depends upon water for its existence. We use 950,000,000

gallons a day. If the supply could be destroyed the city would have to be evacuated. Without water there could be no sewage. No electricity. The railroad terminals would be choked, communication lines broken, the harbor would be crippled. The same holds true of most of our big cities."

"What else?" said Smooth quietly.

"Plenty," said Whitman. "The plan was divided into three separate stages. The first covered the work of these agents before the outbreak of the European war. One group handled the espionage. A second took care of the propaganda. Individual units were established throughout the country. Their purpose was to create race hatred—to cause disunity by turning the Protestants against the Catholics, the Catholics against the Jews, the poor against the rich. Organizers were fed into labor unions; men who had been trained in Europe to create distrust, hatred, violence and destruction. Nationalist groups were formed to promote loyalty to the homeland among naturalized citizens."

"This, and much more was carried out as part of the first stage. The next step came when war was declared in Europe. And now the work was intensified. The espionage was to continue. But above all, America was to be kept neutral!"

Smooth grinned. "We haven't any quarrel with them on that score, Whitman. That's right up our alley."

"NOT quite," said Whitman. He had lighted his pipe and now he puffed slowly for a time, watching the clouds drift through the open window. "This organization didn't want a true neutrality. It wanted—and still wants—one that will favor its own side. It wants a neutrality in which its agents

can work to create hatred against the nations that were our allies in the last war.

"The *Iroquois* incident, for instance—a deliberate attempt to make us mistrust a friendly nation. The reported exposé of a telephone conversation between two of our foreign ambassadors in which there was the implication that our own President had asked for false statements regarding the invasion of Poland. Efforts to sway Congress in its vote on a purely American question. That's the type of neutrality they want, Smooth."

"I get it," said Smooth. "What else?"

"The part that concerns you, directly," said Whitman. "To round out the story I'll jump to the third stage briefly—the work that starts in the event America is dragged into this mess. Work that will make all previous attempts at sabotage look childish. War from within! Factories and shipyards destroyed—water supplies ruined—mass murder and synthetic revolution. You can guess the rest. Or perhaps you can—most of us thought we were reading the dreams of a madman when we saw the orders."

He frowned.

"What about my job?" said Smooth. "Is there anything definite? Any one line I'm supposed to follow?"

"There is," said Whitman, and he looked toward Professor Strickland as though for confirmation. Strickland nodded and Whitman continued: "This country has one possession, so valuable in the light of recent events that foreign agents are willing to attempt anything—*anything* in order to get it. All other matters take second place, and the pick of the espionage service has been put to work on this one objective. It is simply this—get the bomb-

sight used by the United States air forces! Get it at any cost! Almost at the direct cost of war!"

"What?"

Smooth had been pacing as he listened. Now he paused, jammed both hands into his coat pockets and looked at Whitman in evident bewilderment.

"You mean to say we've got an instrument as valuable as that?" he asked. "Is it so much better than the foreign types that they'd gamble on a war?"

"It is," said Whitman. He motioned toward the Department of Justice agent. "Buckley will tell you some of the precautions that have been taken to safeguard it. He'll also tell you how Marie Roubard fits into the case."

"I've been waiting to hear that," said Smooth. He turned to Buckley. "Let's have it, Don—everything you can spare."

"As far as the bomb-sight is concerned," said Buckley, "the plans are safely guarded and we know they can't be stolen. As for the actual instruments—there are a few of them in use for practice work, and these too, are well protected. But in the event of war we'd need a few thousand of them in a hurry. And that's where the hitch comes."

"In what way?"

"In order to have them when we need them it was necessary to set up provisions for their manufacture. The government called in a dozen of the country's leading manufacturers whose plants turned out equipment similar to the parts used in the bomb-sight.

"For instance, the first man called to Washington was Milton Lefforts, owner of the Lefforts Optical Company. He was shown three sets of lenses with their mountings and asked if he were equipped to make these pieces in quantity."

"CHECK," said Smooth. "Then another manufacturer was asked if he could turn out another part of the sight—that it?"

"Yes," said Buckley. "Twelve men, each one knowing only of the part assigned to him. In addition, Milton Lefforts wasn't told about the other manufacturers. He didn't know that Rand Hendrix of the Hendrix Scale Company would be asked about a set of indicators. Nor did Hendrix know about Lefforts."

"Everything possible was done to keep the parts of the puzzle well separated. But in spite of our efforts, Milton Lefforts was threatened with the death of his wife and children the very day he returned to Chicago."

"Threatened?" said Smooth. "In what way?"

"A man met him at the airport, said he'd been sent from Washington, and drove into town with Lefforts. On the way he questioned the manufacturer about the order. Lefforts was suspicious. When he refused to answer any questions he was threatened—told that his wife and children would be killed if he didn't come through."

"You've got men watching his family?"

"Of course," said Buckley. "We've also got men watching the Hendrix family. Rand Hendrix had the same experience when he arrived in St. Louis."

"Why didn't you send an agent along with the next one?"

"We did," said Buckley. "We sent two men along with Grover Kendall, another manufacturer. They were both dead when the plane reached Detroit. An autopsy showed poison."

Smooth could understand why McNeary had aged. He could understand why Buckley and Whitman were look-

ing at him with eyes that were more than serious. Department of Justice agents aren't easy to kill. They aren't careless, and on mission of this importance would take no unnecessary chances.

But two of them had died on one job.

"Isn't there any way of stopping the leak in Washington?" he asked.

"We've tried," said Whitman. "Can't find it."

"Where does Marie Roubard fit?"

"We questioned each of the manufacturers as to where he had been and with whom he had talked after he left Washington," said Whitman. "Finally we learned that Hendrix and Lefforts had stopped off for a short time in New York. And the Club Yvonne was the only place in town that both had visited. Marie Roubard had been introduced to each of them."

"Who did the introducing?" asked Smooth quickly.

Whitman grinned. "We figured that, but it didn't help. Lefforts met her through an old friend—Dave Haley, a newspaper man. Hendrix was alone, but he asked the headwaiter to have her come to the table."

"This was after the *Bremen* affair?"

"Quite a few months after," said Whitman. "We'd already put a man in the Club Yvonne—a waiter. He disappeared last month. We planted another in her apartment as a janitor, and cut in on the phone. Even her mail."

"And you learned nothing?"

"Not a thing. In fact, she leads such a careful life we know she must be one of the crowd we want. No dates—no friends except the girls in her band—doesn't go to any other clubs—nothing!"

"That's the whole story?"

"Yes. It's all yours now, Smooth. And you're welcome to it!"

Smooth nodded thoughtfully. He shook hands with Buckley and Whitman. Then he walked to the desk and faced Professor Strickland.

"I'll do the best I can," he said gravely. "Any further instructions?"

"Only these," said Strickland quietly. He wrote a phone number on a card and handed it to Smooth. "You can generally reach me here on this line until midnight. Call me if you're in doubt about anything. You're playing with war now, Smooth. A mistake on your part may start the guns roaring. Be clever—and be careful."

"Fair enough," said Smooth. He looked at McNeary. "Going my way, Chief?"

"Yes," said the Treasury man. He nodded to the others and walked to the door with Smooth.

CHAPTER III

SPARRING PARTNER

WEST Forty-fourth Street was crowded as usual at the theater-hour. A steady stream of cabs rolled past the door of a small restaurant not far from Broadway. It was a quiet place with an unattractive front. Hardly the spot an out-of-town visitor would select. But its name was old on Times Square.

Inspector McNeary sat at a corner table, his back to the wall and his eyes on the door of a telephone booth. Smooth opened the door and stepped from the booth. He turned up his collar and sat down at the table.

"Cold?" asked McNeary.

"Frozen," said Smooth. "That gal can put more ice into a dozen words than any blonde on earth."

"Is she going to see you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"She'll be here in a few minutes."

McNeary ordered a second cup of coffee. "If this were a routine job I couldn't ask Gilda to help, Smooth. But we need her this time. Need her badly."

"In other words, you don't think I can handle it alone?"

"I know you can't. Its licked the best men we have in three departments. We get a lead, put a man on it and wait. One of two things always happens. Either the lead fades into nothing—or the agent disappears."

"How many men have we lost?"

"Fourteen."

Smooth shook his head. "That sounds like real competition."

"It is," said McNeary.

Both men sat in silence for a time. Smooth glanced at the faces of the men at the adjoining tables. Strangers, most of them. Newcomers to Broadway. But here and there he spotted one of the old crowd—a newspaper man, a bookmaker, a song plugger or some quiet citizen who found it more convenient to steal money than to earn it. All of them looked up when the door opened and a tall girl in black came into the restaurant.

She was big-time. Her clothes and the way she carried them; her manner of walking and the way she held her head—this was New York at its best.

The brim of her dark felt was wider than the fashion designers had declared for the season, but Gilda liked large hats. And she wore them. They make a good background for her smooth blond hair. She knew that, too. Knew she looked well in silver fox.

She walked slowly between the tables, smiling a brief greeting to a sport writer, nodding to a bookmaker.

McNeary was standing when she reached the table in the corner. He

put out his hand. "It's good to see you again, Gilda," he said.

She took his hand. "Same old Mac," she said quietly.

Smooth had taken a wooden match from the tray. He had moistened the tip and was trying to make the match stand upright on the cloth. It refused. He tried again.

Gilda watched him. Her eyes were serious. A minute passed. "Hello, you tramp," she said at length.

Smooth looked up. "That's only one of my names, beautiful. And you're using too much eye-shadow."

"Maybe I am, but my hand doesn't do a rhumba when I try to use it." She picked up a match, stood it upright on the cloth and glanced down at Smooth. "I also do card tricks."

"Remarkable woman," said Smooth. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Not lately."

"Careless of me," he said. "Would you care to join us?"

"So sorry. I'm reducing."

Smooth looked at the even lines that made Gilda Garland very easy to watch. Looked at her trim ankles. "Yes, I'm afraid you have put on a little weight, gorgeous."

There was a glass of water on the table. Gilda's purse tipped it. Smooth jumped to his feet an instant too late. He wiped the water from his coat and picked up the glass.

"Careless of me," said Gilda casually.

SHE sat down and looked at McNeary. The inspector was smiling. He'd seen all this before. Many times. He'd also seen Smooth Kyle change from a suave, fast-talking New Yorker into a raving, screaming maniac when a gangster's bullet had found its mark

in this same Gilda Garland's shoulder.

The fight that followed is still talked about by thin-lipped men who sit and tell of the days when the gangs ran Manhattan. "With his hands," they say. "Broke him with his hands. You should a seen 'im when Smooth got through." And since that day the quiet men had kept clear of Gilda Garland.

McNeary also knew the other side of the story. He knew of a time when the men who ruled the mobs had joined together with one purpose in mind—to get Smooth Kyle. And this same blonde with the innocent smile had talked with these men. Told them quietly she would hunt them down and even the score. And they had believed her.

Now, after many months they were facing each other across a table. They should have been smiling—eager to talk and tell of the things each had done. There should have been questions—oh, a dozen things. Instead, they acted as though it were only the space of a day and a night since they had met. McNeary shook his head.

"We were at the Stork Club," Gilda said quietly. "Smooth promised to get tickets for a new show and call me on the phone. I wanted to see the show so I agreed to wait for his call."

"But I *did* phone," said Smooth.

"Of course you did, handsome—from Roumania!"

"Is it my fault if the Department sends me to Europe?"

"I wish they'd sent you to Siberia!"

"They did."

"Why didn't you stay there?"

"Too many brunettes. I like—"

McNeary lifted a hand. "Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But this could go on all night and I have to be in Washington in the morning. Suppose we talk business now and you two can fight later."

"Business?" said Gilda. She took a silver case from her purse and lit a cigarette. "I'm doing very well in my own, Mac. A shop on Madison Avenue."

"Need a salesman?" Smooth asked.

McNeary rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "I asked Smooth to call you, Gilda, because he's just been assigned to the most important case that has ever come to our department. He can't handle it alone. If he expects to keep alive he needs more than luck. He needs you, Gilda."

Gilda's eyes were serious. "Let's have it, Mac. All of it."

He told her, then. And as he talked Gilda's fingertips played a rapid tattoo on the cloth. At times she glanced at the man who sat beside her. Once, her hand touched his. Covered it in a protective gesture that said more than many words.

When the inspector had finished, she sat quietly, watching the smoke drift from the tip of her cigarette. At length she smiled.

"I might have known it couldn't last," she said. "Here I am, the owner of a fashionable dress shop. My debts paid and business getting better every day. All I ask in the world is peace and a four-room apartment on Madison Avenue. And what happens?" She pointed her cigarette at Smooth. "The Boy Wonder bounces into town, buys a ride on the merry-go-round, and I have to stand alongside of him to see that he doesn't fall down and bump his cute little nose!"

"So nice of you," said Smooth quickly. "But far be it from me to upset your life. Asking you in was the chief's idea—not mine."

"Oh, shut up!" said Gilda. "You talk and don't say anything."

McNEARY stood up. He glanced at his wristwatch and frowned. "Just about time for me to make my plane. I'd like to stay for the end of the fight but I'm afraid I'll have to read about it in the newspapers. Watch your step—both of you. Report to Professor Strickland whenever you can."

When they were alone Smooth and Gilda sat quietly. Smooth drew patterns on the cloth with a burnt match. Gilda studied them. She took another match, lit it and used the burnt tip to add a few designs of her own. Once she looked up to catch him staring at her. She smiled. Smooth smiled, too. He put down the match and rested his hand upon hers.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"About what?"

"About me—that I'm the kind of a guy that I am."

"What kind of a guy is that?"

"Screw, I guess."

"I'm sorry too," said Gilda.

"About what?"

"About me—that I'm the kind of a gal that likes screw people."

Again here was a long silence. Smooth looked into the eyes of the girl who faced him and wondered what mad quirk in his makeup forced him to stay in a job that kept him away from Gilda. It didn't make sense. But then, few things in his life did. Some day, perhaps, he would know what it was all about. Some day he would climb off the merry-go-round and call it quits. Some day. But not now. He glanced at his watch as McNeary had done.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"A few."

"What's the first?"

"We visit the Club Yvonne and meet the charming little brunette who leads the orchestra."

"You're sure Marie Roubard is a brunette?"

"She'd have to be. Blondes don't sell out the country that gives them a living."

"Meow!" said Smooth. "I met a blonde in Germany who would have sold me Berlin."

"Why didn't you smile at her, Handsome? She'd have given it to you for nothing."

"We were talking about Marie Roubard—do you know her?"

"We were talking about that blonde in Berlin—how well did you get to know her?"

"Hardly at all. About Marie Roubard," he said. "How do we meet her?"

"Through Dave Haley. He usually drops into the Club Yvonne during the evening."

"I don't like that guy."

"Why?"

"Because you like him."

"Flatterer!" said Gilda. "Pay the check and let's roll."

CHAPTER IV

SIC SEMPER NIGHT CLUBS

A CAB took them east to Fifth Avenue and north to Fifty-second Street. Smooth paid the driver and walked with Gilda to the entrance of the Club Yvonne. It was the usual night spot—an old brownstone dwelling, remodeled, the steps cleared away and a canvas *porte cochère* erected above the new doorway. A uniformed doorman bowed to Gilda, looked hard at Smooth and twisted one corner of his mouth into a fast grin.

"Lo, Smooth," he whispered. "Long time no see."

"Hello, Riley," said Smooth quietly. "How long have you been pushing doors?"

"Ever since Repeal. Times is different, feller."

"They could be worse," said Smooth.

He followed Gilda into the Club. A girl in a red jacket and short blue skirt came forward to take his hat. A tall headwaiter bowed to Gilda and motioned to Smooth.

"You have a reservation, sir?" he asked, and his accent was almost too English.

"Quite," said Smooth. "My man called, I believe."

"And the name, sir?"

"Lord Woofley, late of Chittenham-on-Pugs."

The head waiter grew inches. He glanced down at Smooth from tired eyes and slowly shook his head. "There are no empty tables, I'm afraid."

Gilda stepped on Smooth's foot. She smiled at the headwaiter. "Mr. Kyle has an odd sense of humor, Frederick, but he tips well. We'd like a table near the orchestra, if you please."

"I'm afraid that will be impossible, Miss Garland," said Frederick. "Quite impossible."

Gilda looked at Smooth. "Nice work, Handsome. Now suppose you tell me what happens next?"

"Gladly," said Smooth. He motioned toward a short, heavy-set man who was standing at the far side of the room. "Hi, Jacques!! Got a minute to spare?"

Jacques Boville, immaculate in evening clothes, came quickly toward the doorway. The years had put a little weight on the well-mannered Frenchman. His hair was thinner but Smooth saw that Jacques still spent hours before his mirror, trimming the thin black mustache and tipping it with wax.

The owner of the Club Yvonne increased his pace as he approached. He held out both hands. "Monsieur Kyle!"

he said. "It is a vary great pleasure to see you again. Vary great indeed!"

"Glad to hear it," said Smooth. He nodded toward the head waiter. "Sir Frederick says there are no more tables. That right?"

"But he is not know you are my frand!" cried Boville. "Of a certainty there is a table. The vary bast table!"

"By the orchestra?"

"Pouf! Much batter than that!"

"We like music," said Smooth. He grinned at Gilda. "Right under the drums, Jacques."

Boville escorted them past the short bar, along an aisle crowded closely with occupied tables and stopped near the orchestra section. He called a waiter. Two waiters. He frowned at Frederick and whispered something. The tall Englishman shrugged. He lifted his hands in an apologetic gesture and drew back a chair.

"I hope you will pardon me, Miss Garland," he said. "I did not know Mr. Kyle was one of the important people."

"He's not," said Gilda. "We'll have some wine, Frederick. Lansons—you pick the year. Very cold."

"Certainly, madame."

Frederick frowned at Smooth, half closed his eyes and stalked toward the rear of the Club. Gilda looked at Smooth and then turned slowly toward the orchestra.

The girls were in cleverly cut blue dinner jackets. Pretty, most of them. Smooth liked the one at the piano. Liked the girl who played the trombone. Then he saw the leader.

She was short and dark and very wide-eyed. Her nose was tilted just enough to be interesting and the trim lines of her jacket showed that Marie Roubard had more than music to offer the patrons of the Club Yvonne.

"Very nice, indeed," he said slowly.

"Yes, if you like them dark."

"I might."

THE orchestra played on old Viennese waltz. Marie Roubard put down her baton and picked up a violin. She played well, smiling at people she knew in the crowd. She looked at Gilda. Smiled again. Then she looked at Smooth. She continued to look until the chorus had been played for a second time. Her smile was friendly.

"She likes me," said Smooth.

"Act your age," said Gilda. "She's watching Frederick ice the wine. If you'd ordered scotch and soda she wouldn't have seen you."

"Personally I think it's my profile. A dollar gets you twenty she comes to the table after this number."

"You've got a bet, sucker."

The music stopped and Marie bowed to the applause. She smiled again at Smooth and left the platform. Smooth leaned back in his chair. He waited. Marie came toward the table, passed it and went through a small door at the end of the bar. Gilda put out her hand.

"Twenty dollars, my frand."

Smooth took out his wallet. "I've been framed." He paid his bet and turned to the head waiter. "Bring me a menu and tell Jacques I want him."

"Very well, sir," said Frederick. He took a menu from one of the adjoining tables and offered it to Gilda. He found another for Smooth. "May I recommend the turtle soup, sir?"

"You may," said Smooth shortly. "It won't do you a damn bit of good."

Gilda laughed. "Don't let it throw you, Handsome. Marie Roubard has a reputation to uphold. She only sits with very important people. If you read Dave Haley's column you'd know such things."

"Important or not, she'll sit here if Jacques tells her to."

"Wrong again," said Gilda. "Every night club on Fifty-second Street is bidding for her. Marie doesn't have to take orders from Jacques."

"In other words, she's hard to meet?"

"Not if you know the right people."

"Dave Haley again?"

"Yes. He's standing at the bar. Shall I ask him to get Marie?"

Smooth looked at the man in gray who stood with a group at the bar. He was of medium height, carefully dressed and his face and voice were known to millions. Five years ago he had come from a small town newspaper in the middle west. Almost overnight he had found success in New York.

Broadway liked him and told him its secrets. Haley printed them. His by-line became important on Times Square. His column was required reading for anyone in show business. Then he widened his field.

Reached toward Washington and the capitals of Europe. Time and again he had come through with inside information days ahead of the regular news columns. He was *the* Dave Haley—maker of stars.

Haley seemed to sense Smooth's eyes on him. He turned, glanced quickly at Kyle and then saw Gilda. He put down his glass and hurried to the table.

"Say, young lady," he said. "I thought you told me you were too busy to step out of an evening. Is this a nice way to treat a friend?"

"I am busy most evenings," said Gilda. "This is an exception." She motioned toward Smooth. "Have you ever met Mr. Kyle, Dave? He used to be part of this town."

"Smooth Kyle?" said Haley. His

eyebrows went up. "Never met him but I've heard plenty about him. Glad to know you, Kyle."

HE PUT out his hand and Smooth took it. Haley was being nice. Making an effort to please. Still, there was a proprietary manner in the way he pulled up a chair and seated himself beside Gilda. Smooth didn't like it. But a man couldn't be bouncing around Europe and expect the rest of the world to stand aside and wait for him to come back.

"Still with the Treasury Department?" Haley asked casually.

"Yes," said Smooth. "But don't print it."

"Wouldn't think of printing it," said Haley. "But if you're working on a case here in New York I'd be glad to help in any way I can. I hear things, you know."

"So I've been told."

"And I know quite a few people."

"I've heard that, too," said Smooth. "Thanks for the offer, but this is a vacation."

"Then you've started in the right place. Great little spot, the Club Yvonne."

"Yeah—very nice. A little crowded, though."

Gilda leaned forward. "Smooth seems to be interested in Marie but I've told him she doesn't talk to strangers. I wonder if you could arrange an introduction, Dave?"

"Glad to," said Haley.

As he stood up, a middle-aged man in a blue serge suit walked unsteadily to the table and rested both hands on the cloth. His eyes were laughing and he'd had just enough drinks to make him feel good. He lifted one hand and pointed at Haley. Then he nodded.

"Yessiree!" he said happily. "I says

to George, I says, 'I betcha that's Dave Haley over there'. An' he bets me he wasn't. So I came right over, an' sure enough—it's Dave!"

He put out his hand and Haley frowned. "Some other time, please," he said sharply. "You'll have to excuse me now. I'm busy."

He ignored the outstretched hand and tried to walk past. The happy man lost his grin. He drew himself erect and looked at Haley from beneath half lowered lids.

"So that's it, eh?" he said slowly. "Dave Haley's head grew with his reputation. Got a byline now so he doesn't remember his friends." He waved a hand in dismissal and turned. "It's okay with me, feller. Just mark Dick Frohm off the list. We can get along without Haley in Kansas City!"

Haley reached forward and caught his arm. "Dick!" he cried. His manner changed and he put his arm about the man's shoulder. "I'm sorry, old-timer! Why, I didn't recognize you! Too much night work, I guess. The eyes are going sour!" He patted Frohm's shoulder and turned to Gilda and Smooth. "I want you both to meet Dick Frohm, city editor of the best paper in the country. He's a swell guy but he used to steal my rubbers every time it rained!" He laughed and completed the introduction.

Smooth pointed to a chair. "Would you like to join us?" he asked.

"Sorry," said Frohm. "Been drinkin' just a wee bit too much. Got one of the boys with me and we're here to see the Fair. We've only two days and we've a lot of stops to make. Tomorrow, maybe, eh?"

Haley winked at Smooth again and patted Frohm's shoulder. "All right, Dick—any time you say. Look me up and we'll do the town."

"Glad to, Haley," said Frohm. "We've been hoping you'd sort of bounce in and see us at the paper. You know—hometown boy makes good and comes back for applause." He turned to Gilda and smiled. "We turn out real newspapermen in Kansas City, Miss Garland. Trouble is, none of them ever come back."

Dave Haley's face had lost its smile. He chewed for a moment on his under lip, then looked at Frohm. "I'm sorry, Dick," he said quietly. "I guess you know why I haven't been home."

"Yes," said Frohm. He nodded. "I can understand." He looked at Haley and shook his head thoughtfully. "Well, I'll run along now. I've got to get back to George and start rolling again."

"Where is George?" asked Haley.

"Right at the bar," said Frohm. He pointed toward a younger man who was resting an elbow on the bar and looking at Haley. "He says you've been looking right through him all night. He's sore, too."

Haley waved an arm and laughed. "Come on over here, George!" he called. "That is, unless you'll still wearing one of my shirts and don't want to return it."

THE man at the bar put down his drink and walked to the table. Haley shook hands with him and introduced him as George Condon, one of the reporters with whom he had worked. He chatted for a moment, kidded Condon about a blue shirt he had borrowed and never returned, and insisted Condon stay to have at least one drink.

"Make it tomorrow instead," said Condon. "We're at the Astor and don't leave until the next morning. Why not give us a ring?"

Haley promised he would, said

goodbye to his friends and sat down to look thoughtfully at the cloth.

"I've been trying to forget Kansas City for five years," he said quietly. "Somehow, it always catches up with me."

"What's wrong with Kansas City?" asked Gilda. "I like the place."

"I did too," said Haley, "until my mother and kid brother were killed there—burned to death when our house caught fire. I was in New York at the time. I never went back."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dave," said Gilda. "No wonder you want to forget."

He shrugged. "Well, that's the way it goes—some people call me lucky. They say I'm the most important man in New York. Personally, I'd rather be less important and—" He stood and pointed toward the door at the end of the bar. "Excuse me a moment. I'll see what's keeping Marie."

He left the table and Smooth watched him cross the restaurant.

"There goes a phoney if I ever saw one," he said. "He saw Frohm and Condon but tried to pass them up until Frohm told him where to head in. You must be slipping, beautiful. He's not in your league."

"And who is?"

"I am."

"Modest little boy, aren't you?" said Gilda. She gestured toward the door. "Be smart, handsome. Dave Haley knows his way around in this town. He can be a good friend—or a tough customer. Right now you need him, so pull in your lower lip and behave."

Haley had opened the door and with him was Marie Rouhard. The girl looked quickly at Smooth, smiled and whispered something to the columnist. He laughed and led her to the table.

"I've told Marie about you, Kyle, and she's anxious to know you," said

Haley. He turned to Gilda. "I think you two have already met."

"Yes," said Gilda. She smiled at the orchestra leader.

SMOOTH was standing. He put out his hand and felt Marie's firm fingers grip his own. He looked down into her eyes. Blue eyes. Over them were long black lashes. He told Marie how glad he was to know her. Her fingers tightened. He told her she was a very fine musician. She tilted her head and smiled up at him. He told her she was very beautiful.

And just then a small, sharp shoe landed against his ankle. He looked at Gilda. She was smiling at Marie.

"Won't you sit down?" said Gilda sweetly.

"Oh, I would like that vary much."

A waiter brought another chair and Frederick came to the table. He stood at Smooth's shoulder and suggested various items on the menu. Dave Haley made other suggestions. Soon Jacques Boville came to join them. He took the menu from Haley and studied it carefully. He would recommend the snails.

"*Escargot!*" said Marie, and she laughed. "But Mr. Kyle ees not French! He will not like thee snail—no!"

"Check," said Smooth. "Mr. Kyle, he is American. He will like one ham and cheese sandwich on rye."

Frederick disapproved. He frowned at Smooth, took the other orders and walked off in disgust. Dave Haley made conversation, well and easily. He was beyond the prying stage. People came to him. As for Jacques Boville, he seemed more anxious to forget the old days. Repeal had been a blessing. He was now a prosperous and respected restaurateur. Important people came to the Club Yvonne—the best families of New York.

Smooth was only half listening. He devoted most of his attention to the dark-haired girl who sat beside him. Marie was clever. No doubt of that. It was in her eyes. Wise eyes. Too wise for a girl in her early twenties.

"Dave 'as tell me you are working for the government," she said casually. "That ees interasting work—yes?"

"Very interesting—no," said Smooth."

Marie laughed. "You make fun of my accent?"

"I think it's a very nice accent," said Smooth. "Where did you buy it?"

"It ees natural. I am born in Alsace-Lorraine."

"After the war?"

"During the war." She looked at Smooth from under her long lashes. "And now it is happen all over again—thee war. You think this country will join—no?"

"You never can tell, but if we do, those birds in Europe are going to see something that will open their eyes."

"Yes?"

"Something new," said Smooth quietly. "We're not quite ready to spring it yet, but when we do—"

"It ees secret—no?"

"Oh, a big secret."

"How interesting," said Marie. Her voice didn't match her words. She, too, was making conversation. Soon she excused herself and left the table to conduct the orchestra.

Gilda leaned close to Smooth. "How're you doing, Sherlock?"

"Swell."

"Did you find them there buried jewels yet?"

Smooth pushed back his chair. "How about a dance? Or would you rather have a kick in the shins?"

Haley looked up, startled. He glanced at Smooth and then turned to Gilda.

She laughed. "He beats me but I love him."

THEY left the table and Smooth put an arm about Gilda's waist. The music was good and the floor wasn't too crowded. He moved slowly toward the center and held his mouth close to Gilda's ear.

"Listen, gorgeous," he said quietly. "I'm supposed to be working on a case. How do you expect me to get anywhere when you sit there and toss wise-cracks?"

"Act your age, darling," said Gilda. "That stuff about a big secret went out of date before the the Civil War. Do you expect Marie to fall for it?"

"So what do I do?"

"Think fast and make a wish."

Smooth's arm tightened about her waist. "Let's make believe we're strangers and start acting nice. I think you're wonderful."

The music stopped and he walked with Gilda to the table. The food had not yet been served. Boville had gone but Haley was talking with a thin-lipped man in evening clothes. Both of them stood when Gilda approached and Smooth looked into a pair of eyes he had seen more than once before. Brown eyes with small gold flecks about the rims of the pupils. They were smiling now, and the man who owned them had extended his hand.

"Remember me, Smooth?"

"Yeah," said Kyle. He took the hand and looked again into the gold flecked eyes. "Mark Hesson—used to deal roulette for Rod Martell, didn't you?"

"That was long ago," said Hesson. "I'm in the shipping business now—Red Crescent Line. Doing very well, too."

"Glad to hear it," said Smooth.

"You still with the Government?"

"Yes—why?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. But I saw you here at the table and thought I'd look you up before you—looked me up."

"I haven't any reason to look you up, Hesson. Even though I do think you're the guy who took a shot at me one night in Havana."

"You've got me wrong, Smooth."

Smooth grinned. "Have it your way. Anything I can do for you?"

"No. But I might be able to do something for you."

"How come?"

"Oh, just an idea of mine. Where can we talk?"

CHAPTER V

SNATCH AT MIDNIGHT

THAT was a question old in New York. One Smooth had heard many times, and asked many times. It was blunt, and might have been offensive to anyone unfamiliar with midnight Manhattan. Smooth looked toward the bar. Too many people there. He saw an empty table in the far corner of the room. A small table, set alone as though for the purpose of quiet conversation. He nodded to Hesson and they walked to the rear of the room.

"Cigarette?" said Smooth.

"Thanks." For a time neither spoke. Each watched the smoke lift above the table. Finally Hesson's peculiar eyes narrowed as though he had made a hard decision. "Just how much do you know about me?"

"Enough to send you to the chair."

"You're sure you could make it stick?"

"Very sure."

"Why haven't you turned me in?"

"Because it's not my job," said Smooth casually. "I work for the

Treasury Department, not the F. B. I. or the city police. A few years ago I thought you were running with a bunch of counterfeiters. I wasn't sure. If I had been, I'd have tossed you into the can or done the next best thing."

"But did you get the goods on me?"

"For murder—yes. But not for counterfeiting."

"Anyone I killed had it coming to him."

"That's another reason I kept my mouth shut," said Smooth. "But why the post mortem? What's it lead to?"

"Plenty," said Hesson. "I've always known you and Gilda could put the rap on me, but I didn't think there was anyone else who could. A short while ago I learned different."

"What am I supposed to do—break down and cry?"

Hesson grinned. "Not quite. I'm just giving you the picture and maybe you can guess the answer." He tapped the end of his cigarette against a tray and lowered his voice. "I went into the shipping business. I'd made a big stake and I laid it on the line with an English steamship company that operates a few freighters. I bought a controlling interest and took over the New York office. Everything on the up and up, you understand."

"Keep talking."

"When the war broke out, our business continued but our sailings were controlled by the British Admiralty. That is, we are given the sailing dates and the hours of departure for all ships leaving port. Our usual custom is to load, get clearance and anchor in the Upper Bay until we get further orders. When these come, I notify the captain of the ship and he leaves to pick up the convoy or try to make it across on his own."

"Are the freighters armed?"

"Yes. a six-inch gun aft, manned by a British gun crew."

"Check," said Smooth. "Go ahead."

Hesson looked down his nose.

"Last week a man who called himself Thomas Gray came to my office and asked me if I remembered Duce Torney and Alf O'Neil. I guess you know whether I remember them or not, Smooth."

Kyle nodded.

"You ought to. You killed both of them."

"That's what this guy Thomas Gray told me—and he offered proof."

Smooth grinned. "I hope he had sense enough to keep his hand near a gun when he told you. Or is Mr. Gray missing?"

"He's still around and he isn't worrying about me," said Hesson. "The phone rang while he was waiting for me to say something. When I answered, someone repeated the same thing Gray had said and threatened to pass it along to the D. A. if anything happened to Gray."

"The old protection gag, eh?"

"But worked by experts."

"What was Gray's racket. A little blackmail?"

Hesson shook his head. "I'd have paid off if he wanted money, and sooner or later I'd have taken tare of Mr. Gray. But he didn't ask for a nickel. Instead, he made a proposition."

"What was it?"

"He knew the *Malay Princess* was loaded with general cargo and ready to leave the Bush Docks in Brooklyn. He even knew the location of her anchorage in the Upper Bay. He told me to hold the ship until he gave me the order to let her clear. In return, he'd keep his mouth shut about those two murder raps."

SMOOTH looked at the man across the table. Mark Hesson had been as hard as any of the fast money crowd. In addition, he'd used his head just a little better than the others. A good man with cards, he was wise in the ways of the men who make a quick dollar. One step ahead, usually. Tonight he was worried. Smooth felt Hesson had told the truth.

"What's your guess?" he asked slowly.

"I'm not sure," said Hesson. "At first I figured the Nazis had planted a submarine off the coast and were feeding it meat. That may still be the case, but I doubt it."

"You're covered with marine insurance?"

"Hell, yes! I won't lose a nickel if they sink every ship our company owns. It's not money, Smooth—believe it or don't."

"I'm funny that way, Hesson—I do believe it."

"Thanks."

"And I can see you're on a spot, too," said Smooth. "No guy wants to grab a hot seat, and if he's regular, he doesn't want to play stooge for little Adolph's subs."

"So what does he do?"

"Why not play it across the board with the Department of Justice? Come clean with them and ask them to back you."

Hesson shook his head. "I'm afraid you haven't been in town long enough, Smooth. Those days are over."

"How come?"

"Politics," said Hesson quietly. "We've got a D. A. in this town who's smart and plenty ambitious. He's got a reputation as a dragon-slayer and he's dynamite on the guys in the racket. Lately, there haven't been any Dillingers around—no real headline-makers."

So the D. A. decides to build one. He turns the heat on a guy who never rated bigger than a two-bit punk in the racks. Oh, there's a few murder raps against him and the usual run of stuff, but he isn't big and never was big until he was built in the newspapers."

Smooth's grin was one of amusement. "A little corny, but it gets votes. Did he pick up the guy?"

"That's just the trouble," said Hesson. "He was all set to make the pinch but the Department of Justice crowd beat him to it. The punk makes a deal with them and leaves the D. A. holding the bag. Since then, anyone who tries to make a deal is just asking for trouble."

"Maybe you're right," said Smooth.

"I know I'm right," said Hesson. "If I gave this story to the Department of Justice, Gray would give the D. A. enough evidence to burn me. And don't think he wouldn't enjoy squaring matters with the Washington crowd!"

Smooth whistled thoughtfully. It was the old story—older than New York. Two branches of government waging a personal battle for political power. There was nothing wrong or crooked about it. No matter which side won, the public gained and the criminals lost. In fact, it was the best possible method of insuring adequate protection for the public. As long as these two branches were competing in an effort to show results, there would never be a moment of rest for the men who lived on the proceeds of crime.

But like most good things, this setup had a price. And Smooth couldn't blame Mark Hesson for trying to avoid paying it. No man wants to burn, even if he is guilty. But here was a man who was thinking of his country. Even that wasn't new.

Hundreds of criminals had volun-

teered in the last war. Paris had sent a company of Apaches from her sewers to fight like fiends in the trenches. Thieves came out of Limehouse pubs and marched to the front to die as heroes. Many a man wanted for murder and worse had sailed to France in a khaki uniform, and stayed forever in a soldier's grave.

MEN are like that. Even men with twisted minds. Deep down in their hearts there is a flaming thing—a light that smolders but seldom dies. True, they may hate the laws of the civilized world. They may hate the men who make these laws. They'll laugh at the courts and laugh at the judge, just as they'll laugh at the men who hunt them.

But then comes the day when this land they call home sends out a cry for soldiers to fight its battle. And out of the night come the hunted men. Men without even a name. But they guess a name and they write it down—Smith, Jones, Levy or Murphy, Keating or Sicilione. They shoulder a gun and they march away—and why? Even they couldn't tell you.

And so it was with Mark Hesson. Smooth looked at the troubled man and tried to guess the answer. It was a new rôle. One he didn't like.

"You say the *Malay Princess* is ready to sail," he asked.

"Yes," said Hesson. "And what's more, orders came through from the Admiralty this morning that she is to sail at midnight. I haven't passed them along because I haven't received instructions from Gray."

"Does he come to your office every day?"

"No. I was told to stay there until six, eat dinner at the Times Tavern and then come here. I stay here until mid-

night and then go to my apartment uptown. Same routine every day. And feller, I'm getting sick of this joint!"

"Who wouldn't?" said Smooth. He bent his cigarette against the tray. "I'll tell you what we'll do, Mark—you play it through just as you've been doing. Hold the *Malay Princess* until you get word from Gray. *But don't let her sail until you pass the word to me!*"

Hesson stood up and put out his hand. "Thanks, Smooth," he said. "I'll sleep better tonight."

"You will," said Smooth ruefully. "But I won't. C'mon, you mug—let's get back to the table."

The orchestra was still playing and Marie had not returned. Gilda was talking quietly with Dave Haley and she paused now to point to a chair.

"Sit down and have a drink with us, Mark," she said. "I haven't seen any of the old crowd for quite some time. What are they doing these days?"

"The usual," said Hesson. He seated himself and leaned forward to rest his arms on the table. "A little roulette and dice at Saratoga. The races and a few places in the South. Things have been bad for most of them but they expect easy money now that war has started in Europe."

"And you're all washed up with cards?"

"Definitely!" said Hesson. "I made a hit and went into a legitimate business. Profits are small but the life is easier on the nerves—sometimes."

They talked for a time of men Gilda had once known—men whose names had made headlines. Gamblers, the fast-money crowd, racketeers who had ruled an underworld that spread across the entire United States. Dave Haley was an interested listener. At times he added a word. Usually he was silent. At length he glanced at his watch.

"Guess I'll have to run along in a few moments," he said. "I won't be gone more than a half hour. Save some of the conversation until I get back."

"Why not stay and hear it now?" asked Gilda.

"Is that nice?" laughed Haley. "I thought you were one of my public, Gilda. All over this country a hundred million people are watching the clock—waiting for Dave Haley to make his newscast. And now you admit you don't even know the time of my program. A fine thing!"

Gilda laughed with him. "I'm sorry, Dave. We'll get Jacques Boville to turn on the radio and I'll listen to every word you say. You run along and thrill the public."

"Oh, so now I'm getting chased, eh? Just for that I'll stay and have another drink."

Marie Roubard came from the orchestra stand and sat next to Smooth. She glanced at Haley and then pointed to the watch on his wrist. "You weel be late—no? It ees almost time, Dave."

"Thanks, Marie," said Haley. He winked at Gilda. "You see? Marie never forgets. That's why I love her."

Smooth had been listening. The food had not arrived and he was growing impatient. He motioned to a passing waiter.

"Send Frederick to the table. Make it fast."

"Sorry, sir," said the waiter. "Frederick is not here at present. Is there something I can do?"

"What do you mean, he's not here? Where is he?"

"I don't know, sir. Another gentleman has just asked for him but I could not find him. Can I help you?"

"Yes," said Smooth. "Find out what happened to our order and chase it along."

"Very well, sir," said the waiter. He hurried away.

Gilda had been leaning forward as she talked with Mark Hesson and Haley. Suddenly, Smooth saw her fingers press hard against the cloth. She leaned back, looking intently at the doorway as she touched Smooth's hand.

"Sit tight, Handsome," she said, and her voice was hardly a whisper. "Don't turn and don't move your hands. If you go for your gun you haven't a Chinaman's chance of reaching it. Think fast and guess right!"

"What's the setup?" asked Smooth quietly. He didn't move.

"Behind you—coming across the room—Nick Sully and Tony Carmetta. Braden and Jock Shultz are with them and they have you covered."

SMOOTH felt an ice cube forming under his belt. He drew a deep breath and held it. Soon his stomach felt as though it had been in cold storage for a week. Sully, Carmetto, Braden and Shultz—four misfits left over from the old days. Misfits that killed for money and did it well. Smooth had no quarrel with any of them but that made little difference. If they were coming toward him with guns in their hands, it was a safe bet this was the payoff. He braced his feet but kept his hands on the table. He leaned forward to make clearance at the opening of his coat.

"Don't try it," Gilda warned. "Braden has his hands in his coat pockets but his guns are lined up with your neck. He's full of hop and almost ready to fly. So is Shultz."

Smooth glanced at Hesson. The ex-gambler hadn't moved a finger. The color had gone from his face and he looked directly at the wall. Marie Roubard's eyes were wide. She was breath-

ing quickly and looking first at Smooth and then at Hesson.

Gilda picked up a cigarette and reached casually for her purse as though in search of a match.

"Nix, Gilda," said a thin voice. "That's a sucker's trick."

Gilda's hand stopped. She looked at Smooth. He shrugged and turned to glance up at the man who stood at his shoulder. Jock Shultz was short, stooped and built like a bantamweight. He wore a dark felt and a loose fitting topcoat with large pockets. His hands were sunk deeply in the pockets and Smooth saw the outline of two gun barrels.

Next to Shultz stood another man, and he too, wore a topcoat and kept his hands in the pockets. Braden was taller than the others. His face was large and the skin was drawn tightly over his cheekbones. The pupils of his eyes, like Shultz's, were dilated and bright.

"Deal it either way you want, Kyle," he said. "Sit quiet and nothing happens. Make a try and you get it in the chest."

"What's the play?" asked Smooth quietly.

"It don't concern you, feller. We got orders to take Hesson uptown to see a guy. Any objections?"

"None at all," said Smooth.

He watched Sully and Tony Carmetta move closer to Hesson. They were smiling, as though they were two friends who had stopped to say a casual hello. For that matter, no one in the Club Yvonne was paying any attention to the group at the table. The voices had been kept low and the men with the guns knew their business.

Carmetta motioned to the ex-gambler. Hesson stood up. He bowed to Marie and Gilda, and turned.

"Whenever you're ready, gentlemen," he said quietly.

"We're ready," said Carmetta.

Hesson looked at Smooth. "Goodbye, feller."

"Goodbye, Mark," said Smooth.

Hesson walked toward the coat room and Sully walked at his side. Carmetta sauntered along behind them and paused at the door to wait until Hesson bought back his hat. Braden and Shultz still stood at the table. Neither turned to watch Hesson leave. They watched Smooth, instead.

"Why not sit down and have a drink?" asked Smooth.

"Thanks, but we'll stand," said Braden. "We're only staying long enough for Nick and Tony to get clear with Hesson."

"Then what?"

"Nothing," said Braden, "if you act smart. The orders were for Hesson. He's on his way uptown. In a few minutes we'll scam and leave you alone. If you follow, you may get a slug in the chest—but you won't get Hesson. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Then do it the wise way, Smooth. We ain't got nothin' to tell you or the cops. Carmetta made the deal and hired us to stand you off. I'm tellin' you now so you won't make any mistakes."

"Thanks, Braden. I'll try not to make any mistakes."

BRADEN grinned. He motioned to Shultz and the undersized gunman walked slowly toward the entrance hall. When he reached the check room he turned and faced Smooth. Braden left the table and walked across the restaurant, secure in the knowledge that Shultz was covering him. They stood talking in the lobby for just a moment, then Braden left.

2 A—2

"Nice teamwork," said Smooth. "Don't move, Haley—you either, Gilda. Shultz keeps his hands in good shape and he could drop anyone here at the table."

"How long will he stay there?" asked Haley.

"Until Braden pulls the car to the door. Then he'll run for it."

Haley's lips were hard against his teeth. The man was frightened but he tried not to show it. Smooth marked up a score for the columnist. Haley had come through like a regular. So had Marie. She was staring across the room at Shultz and her eyes were still very wide. But her hands were steady. Almost as steady as Gilda's.

There was the sound of a horn. Jock Shultz grinned at Smooth, turned and hurried toward the door. Gilda's hand went out. It caught Smooth's arm and held it tightly.

"Don't go after them!" she said sharply. "They'll expect that! Braden will wait and give it to you as you come through the door!"

Smooth leaned back in his chair. "I know it, beautiful. I've seen the routine too many times to forget it."

Haley was on his feet. "Do you mean you're going to let those killers get away with this. The man who is supposed to be the hardest agent in the service? You're going to let them—"

"Sit down and take an aspirin," said Smooth. He pointed to the chair. "I've known Mark Hesson plenty years. I like the guy. But what good is it going to do him even if I do catch up with Braden and Shultz? Braden wasn't lying—he didn't have to. The gag they pulled is an oldy. But safe."

"Does that mean you can't stop them from killing Hesson?"

"Maybe," said Smooth. "Offhand, I don't expect Mark to be killed. Not to-

night, at least. If I'm wrong—well, that's the breaks. Mark knows I'll do everything I can."

"You won't accomplish much sitting here!"

"Neither will you," said Smooth. He pointed toward Haley's watch. "Maybe you better run along and make that broadcast."

"You're damn right, I will!" snapped Haley. "And what's more—I'll have Hesson in safe hands within an hour."

Smooth thought fast. He knew this was a break for Dave Haley. Knew the man could spread it from New York to California. It was typical of the things that had happened to Haley ever since he went into the newspaper game. Luck. But was this the time to put Mark Hesson's name on the air?

Gilda leaned toward him. "What did Mark tell you, Smooth? Did he expect this? What was it?"

"A headache," said Smooth. He turned to Haley. "Listen, feller—this thing is dynamite. Before you step into it, let me tell you it's bigger than any news story you ever put on the air. You may walk out of that studio and get splattered all over the sidewalk. Your reputation won't help you—not any. And all the cops in town aren't enough to give you protection. This is government stuff."

"Oh, I've heard all that before," said Haley impatiently. "I'm not afraid of a crowd of cheap killers."

"It's your neck," said Smooth. He lifted his hands, palms upward. "Say what you want but don't make any guesses. Then run, don't walk, to the nearest exit."

Haley hurried across the restaurant. He grabbed his hat and ran into the street.

Smooth said, "Well..."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

THREE MEN AND A TUB

Probably you know that Thomas Jefferson was, among a dozen other things, a brilliant inventor. But one invention of his you've never heard about—an amazingly ingenious scheme to select the man with enough American granite in him to stand firm before the fury and the wile of Napoleon. Another fine novelet in the series chronicling Imaginary Moments in the lives of our Presidents. By

THEODORE ROSCOE

Coming in next week's ARGOSY—March 9

Happy Relief From Painful Backache Caused by Tired Kidneys

Many of those gnawing, nagging, painful backaches people blame on colds or strains are often caused by tired kidneys—and may be relieved when treated in the right way.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging

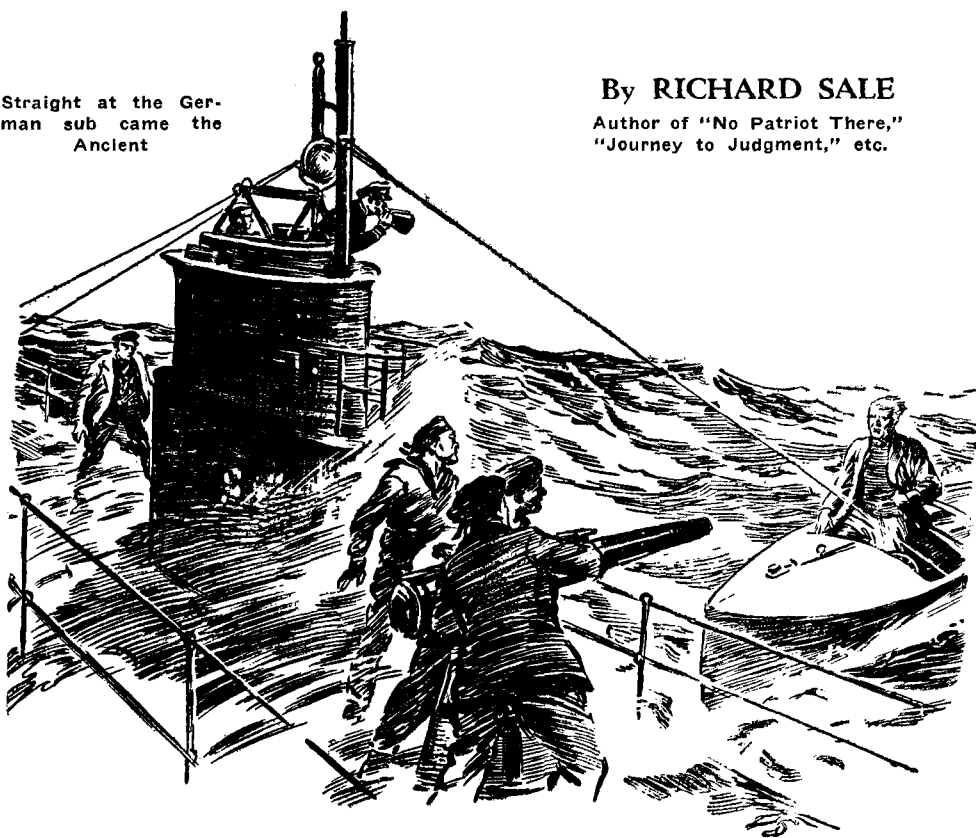
backaches, rheumatic pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

Straight at the Ger-
man sub came the
Ancient

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "No Patriot There,"
"Journey to Judgment," etc.



The Tin Fish

Consider now the extraordinary story of Papa deGar—how he, having sworn by Tahiti's ancient gods, waged a unique and private war against the Imperial German Navy

WAR, you say? Poof! It means nothing here. Raiders, you say, and Nazi submarines to sink the ships of France in these Southern Seas? Of that, *mon ami*, I entertain the greatest doubts. Indeed, this Frenchman goes so far as to say, of a certainty, they will not come into these waters again, *non*, not one of them. For can it be, in the Reich, that they have forgotten so soon the lesson which Papa deGar taught in the last war?

Qu'est-ce que c'est, my friend?

Yes, that is true. Quite true, and a well-put interrogation. You Americans have a blunt and logical approach to arguments which is not unlike our own French logic, and so we love you. Yes, quite true, this island of Tahiti *was* shelled during the last war. Indeed, *monsieur*, this very terrace where we sit, sipping these delectable aperitifs was under fire, the shells burst all about this place. . . . You did not know Papeete was shelled? But yes, it is so.

If you will look across the lagoon where the peaks of Moorea thrust into the sky, *monsieur*, you will see where she came. She was a raider, I do not

recall her name, but she was most daring. Off there she lay, in the mist of the dawn, and *pan! pan!* she commenced to fire. Over this tranquil city of Papeete, they screamed, those shells, and *pom! pom!* they burst. And the simple children of Tahiti, they were struck with terror.

But that, *monsieur*, was before Papa deGar taught the Germans their lesson.

You wish to hear of the story? *Bien*. That is good. For I was going to tell it to you nevertheless. It is a failing old men like myself have. *Regardez*, then, while I expound. . . .

YOU will understand at once that Papa deGar was no spring chicken in those days. *Non*, not he. He had breathed the breath of Tahiti for sixty-seven years up to that morning when the submarine foamed to the surface east of Manao and fired the shot across his bow. Yes, *mon ami*, his hair was white, and his face was wrinkled and leathery and he had a fine smile which reached up into his eyes. Ah, that old one, they called him the Ancient, for it seemed as if he had been in the trade among the islands since God planted pearls deep in the Pacific.

He was a Frenchman, that old one, but he was not white. He was of the brown-faced men, a child of Tahiti; he had descended from the great chiefs of Vaiti who could trace back their ancestry to the three gods Maui who dropped the isle of beauty into the sea from paradise in the beginning.

Papa deGar himself was built like a great god, a gigantic fellow with a wonderful body. You and I, *monsieur*, at sixty-seven we are old and fat and we puff and pant, and we are all but ready for the graveyards, *n'est-ce pas?*

but the Ancient was not like this. His great heart was simple, he was not driven by greed, and he was happy. Such are the things which make a man a giant at such an age.

And his laughter! It was like thunder, the booming *ho-ho-ho* of it. I all but chuckle now at the thought of it, for it was like some happy sickness, contagious as plague, and the sound of it upon one's ears would soon bring about a roaring hysteria! Ho, there was life and truth in that laugh, it was real, it was good!

The war came when Papa deGar was a rich man. Yes, back into the hills and valleys, Papa owned lands and homes which he all but gave away in the rentals. You know how he would rent a place, that Ancient? He would say, "*Monsieur*, I need ten francs to-day. I will rent you the land in the Tunio Valley, one year for ten francs." Imagine such a thing, land like that where the *fei* was thickest and richest, enough to feed an army, for ten francs.

Sometimes, *monsieur*, we wondered how in the name of four blue Devils Papa deGar had ever come into his wealth, for his heart was too big for his body and certainly his body was big enough!

He owned this ship, a magnificent schooner, *monsieur*, all white and fine with the cleanest sails of the copra fleet. She was called the *Nato* which is a kind of trout in our rivers in the mountains. *Oui*, she was a beautiful ship; she was beautiful because the Ancient had put his soul into her lines. Papa, he was never one to till his farms and work his land. *Non* he wanted none of that. In the olden days, he would make great journeys to the outer islands in only an outrigger canoe. And then, with his first sail-boat—she was a tiny thing—he sailed

all the way to Christmas Island to hunt for pearls.

I wish, *monsieur*, only to show you that Papa deGar, bless his rich old heart, loved his ship. That you must comprehend fully because only that can explain why Papa deGar ever allowed his good nature to be conquered by a hunger for revenge. Otherwise, we might see Germans back in these seas in this war.

Comprenez-vous? The ship was his home, and the sea was his carpet, and the wind was his music, and the rain was his roof. Ah, he was a romantic, Papa deGar. He did not like the touch of land beneath his soles for too much of a time.

So we begin.

THE *Nato* was at sea on this fine clear morning, and astern stood Papa deGar himself, at the helm. The helmsman stood by, but Papa liked to feel his ship in his own hands and always when he came near the wheel he would take the helm for a spell. Ah, it was a glorious day, that one, with a fine brisk wind, and the pipe in Papa's mouth was spouting rich blue smoke which whipped off into the quiet white wake.

There was a war on? *Mais oui, monsieur*, there was a war on, but what was that to the Ancient? He did not berth his ship. At that particular moment, he was bound for Papeete whose waters he had not dropped his hook into for four months. War? What was war? Life was good, the ship was full of fine cargo, the sky was full of fine clouds and sunlight, and the Ancient, he was full of being alive.

What did he know of war anyhow, *monsieur*? He, who had never seen a battleship or a submarine or a tank or any of the hideous weapons of war?

Papa deGar, he knew only the sea and the fish and the movies of William S. Hart, two-gun cowboy, which he had seen in Papeete, the same picture over and over again, for Tahitians do not like a bill that is new.

So there was the Ancient, with the wind whipping back his white hair; and suddenly, from the bow, he heard one of his crew send up a bellow and cry, "Captain! Captain deGar! There is a strange ship!"

Papa deGar sprang to his feet and saw for himself. Off to windward, the ocean had boiled white, and the black length of a periscope quickly became the bulk of a conning tower, and next thing, there was the German submarine on the surface, her decks awash, the sea still dripping from her deck gun.

Papa deGar stared in complete amazement. Never never had he seen such a strange ship. "Run quick, my children!" he called. "Bring forth Monsieur Gamin so that he may explain this miracle! It is like some great fish and yet there are men on her. See them come from the black tower!"

The crew of the U-boat was, by this time, flowing out of the conning tower. Already one had a machine-gun mounted on the brackets of the conning tower, and the others were down on the slippery wet deck bringing the muzzle of the gun around for action.

This Gamin, an elderly Frenchman, was a passenger aboard the *Nato*. He had paid his fee to be transported from Cocos Bay to Papeete, to visit with his grandchildren. He had lived long in the islands and he was wise; he came out at once at Papa deGar's entreaty. "Monsieur Gamin," the Ancient cried, "what is this strange monster of the deep which disgorges men, eh?"

Before Monsieur Gamin could reply,

the submarine sent a shot across the bow of the schooner. There was an explosion and a great splash.

"Heave to, *mon vieux!*" Gamin said sharply to the Captain. *Oui*, Papa, you must heave to. You do not understand. That is a U-boat, a ship which travels beneath the surface of the sea. There is a great war on, and this ship belongs to the enemy of France. They wish you to stop."

"But I am not a soldier," said Papa deGar. "I am not fighting in a war. This is my ship and I am carrying my copra and pearl to Papeete."

"Heave to, my old one, words avail nothing. If you do not heave to, he will sink us."

Papa deGar luffed, and the schooner lost her weigh and sat upon the sea with her sails flapping.

They were very close to the U-boat then, and the commander of the submersible raised a megaphone and shouted, "Who is captain of that matchstick?"

"Does he call this ship a matchstick?" Papa deGar said, frowning. "Why, before the wind, she could run away from that tin fish with no trouble at all." He waved his hand and cried, "Here is the captain, me, the Ancient, Papa deGar of the schooner, *Nato!*"

"Tell your men to take to the boats," shouted the U-boat commander. "I am going to sink you. You yourself come to this submarine in a boat, for I wish to question you!"

"You are going to sink *me*?" Papa deGar exclaimed. "And for what stupid reason do you say a thing like that?"

"You are flying the flag of France!"

"I, *monsieur*, am a Frenchman. Why should I not fly such a flag?"

"No, reason, Captain. But I am a German, and our countries are at war.

Haven't you heard? Quick! I give you ten minutes before I fire!"

Papa deGar turned aside, puzzled. "He is a crazy bedbug," he said. "Come, children, off the wind again, we will be on our way to Papeete and away from this crazy man."

"*Nom d'un nom!*" Monsieur Gamin exploded. "Papa, my old friend, you cannot walk away from such a craft. If you start to run he will shell you with that big gun and he will send a torpedo into your vitals and kill us all."

"Tor-pe-do?" Papa deGar said. "What is a tor-pe-do?"

"It is a giant metal fish," said Monsieur Gamin, "which will come from that boat to this beneath the water, and when it hits the *Nato*—*pan!* We will all be blown into bits into the sky! Do as he says, I beg you, *mon ami*. Take to the boats and be grateful for your lives!"

"But he is a crazy man," said the Ancient. "I do not understand. He says he will sink the *Nato*. He would sink a ship as lovely as this? But that is mad, there is no reason for it. I could understand if he would try and steal my ship; others have tried to steal this fine ship. But to sink her—with a full cargo? Is that sanity, Monsieur Gamin?"

"It is war, it is the fruit of war," Monsieur Gamin hastily explained. "Such a craft must work in secret. He cannot take you prize, so he would sink you and prevent your cargo from reaching a port of France."

"My head buzzes," said Papa deGar. "I do not understand, Monsieur Gamin. But you have been around the world, and you are a wise man, so to you I will listen, and I will do as the crazy man says. My children, take to the boats. Atea and Tomi, you will come in

the boat with your captain and Monsieur Gamin, and you will row us to the strange monster so that I may talk with the captain and comprehend this madness."

THEY swarmed from the *Nato*, lowering the two lifeboats which were small craft. And presently, the boat containing Monsieur Gamin and Papa deGar bumped against the steel side of the submarine. A sailor with a gun covered the boat, and the commander, who spoke French very well indeed, came down from the conning tower to the deck.

"Ha!" he said, looking at Gamin. "You are the captain?"

"Non," said Gamin coldly. "He is the captain and owner." He nodded toward Papa deGar.

"He?" said the submarine commander. "Imagine that! A barbaric native of such wealth to own a boat and command it. Permit me: I am Captain Fritsch of the Imperial German Navy, and I regret that I will be compelled to sink your ship. Your name?"

"I am Papa deGar, the Ancient!" Papa boomed. "I have sailed these waters for sixty years and I have never lost a ship. What craziness is this?"

Captain von Fritsch laughed politely. "True, it is crazy, Herr deGar. But that is war. War is a crazy business, *nein*?" He shrugged. "What is your cargo?"

"Copra and pearl," said Gamin. "Bound for Papeete. He does not understand. He does not know what war is. If you could spare his ship—"

"I should love to," said Captain von Fritsch with sarcastic politeness. "But of course, war is cruel, is it not?"

"But it will break his heart, Captain," said Gamin, in German which he could speak falteringly. "He is an

old one who does not understand. Of what value is copra and pearl—"

"Monsieur—Gamin, did you say?—if I were you, I would be worrying about my own life. For I cannot take you aboard with me—we are already crowded. You will have to row to land from here, and it is one hundred miles to Papeete."

"Captain," Gamin sneered, "we do not ask to be taken aboard your smelly tin fish. We prefer to row. And while the only land is one hundred miles away, as far as you know, Papa deGar here knows every atoll, every spit of land in the whole South Pacific, and I wager that we will drink fresh water tonight within three hours."

"Ah, you French," said Captain von Fritsch. "A nation of braggarts and de Bergeracs. Anything for the gesture, *nein*? Stand by then and watch me blow your pleasant little ship to bits. Open fire with the gun! Put them close to the waterline! Don't waste shells!"

He glanced at Gamin. "You're lucky I am so soft. Others might have machine-gunned you in your boats. But I, at least, give you a chance. Better than none."

"A hundred miles!" Gamin snapped.

"Better than none."

"You do not expect us to make it."

Von Fritsch shrugged. "It will not keep me awake nights. War is easy on a man's conscience. You will watch."

The forward gun was firing now, and the gunners quickly got the range. But the shells seemed to have little effect upon the *Nato*. Holes appeared in her side, but there were few shattered splinters of wood when the projectiles burst.

"What they do?" Papa deGar cried in rage. "They cannot break the *Nato*. She was built of the hardest wood of the hills, she is aged and strong, she

has sides of iron, my beautiful ship."

Captain von Fritsch heard him and looked amused. "We will show you, deGar, how steel will break the proud wood which makes your ship. Lieutenant, you will torpedo her."

The *Nato* lay dead ahead, in perfect torpedo range. There was a boiling white streak of foam from the bow of the U-boat, and the German commander followed its path with binoculars which were not necessary. They all saw the white trail reach the *Nato*.

Nothing happened.

GAMIN began to laugh heartily. The explanation was simple enough. They had run the torpedo too deep, and the *Nato* was a shallow-draft boat, as are most copra traders throughout the islands. Captain von Fritsch was in a rage. "*Donnerwetter!*" he roared at his subordinate. "You have wasted one! A surface shot, Lieutenant, and do better!"

The second time, there was a terrific explosion, and the *Nato's* port side seemed to disintegrate. She listed sharply, and sank within five minutes. The mortal blow was a crushing one. It cut her almost in half and then there was only the floating wreckage on the surface of the sea.

"Your proud wood," said the commander, "floats again, each piece individually. You have seen, deGar, that the *Nato*, as you call her, is broken."

Papa deGar stared at the wreckage with tears in his eyes. His face was a tragic thing. He turned to von Fritsch and he said quietly, "*Monsieur*, for this act, you and your strange ship will both die. Me, I am the Ancient, and in my age, I have never slain a man. But this I promise you before the gods Maui—that the deed will be done by my own hand."

"Indeed," said Captain von Fritsch politely. "Then I await your pleasure, black man."

"Black man?" deGar said in horror. "And before you called me a barbaric native? *Monsieur*, I am a Frenchman, and one day you will remember it, I promise you on the blood of the peoples of Vaiti!"

The German commander smiled derisively, and presently the crew and von Fritsch vanished into the submarine. It sank from sight and Papa deGar and the others were left upon the lonely sea. . . .

EH, *monsieur*? An empty threat, you say? But, it was no empty threat. Papa deGar was not a man of idle boasts and empty thinking. *Mais non*. Had I been Captain von Fritsch, I would not have slept nights for worrying.

Oui, of a certainty, they all reached land. As Monsieur Gamin had said, they were on the sand spit of Manekita within three hours, and only a day and a half later, the ship of a friend, Mr. Barney, picked them up. He had sighted the wreckage and he made for Manekita at once, knowing survivors would be there. He found them all and took them on to Papeete.

Papa deGar was a changed Ancient. No more the great laugh rang from his chest, no more did his eyes smile. For he had taken a great oath and it was on his honor to keep that oath, terrible though it might be.

In Papeete, he chartered a small sailing craft, too small for cargo, too small to waste a shell upon, too small to think of bursting with a torpedo. With his crew, he set to sea, leaving Monsieur Gamin behind at the port he had paid to reach. So Gamin did not know where Papa deGar went or what

he did. The little boat was gone three weeks, but one morning, Papa deGar showed up in Papeete once more, and he was beaming from ear to ear.

"Eh, Monsieur Gamin," he said, when he met his old friend, "you should have been with us this trip. We have much good luck."

"Good luck, *mon vieux*?" said Gamin. "And what kind of luck could you have? You carried nothing, you went nowhere."

"We went fishing," said Papa deGar. "And the fishing *magnifique*! But yes. And now I am going to buy a boat and you must come with me."

"Buy a boat?" said Gamin. "But you have other fine boats. The *Nato* was not your only boat. What of the *Westwind*? Smaller, to be sure, but a fine ship. And what of the great *Mako*? She is here, my friend, in Papeete. She came in from the Cocos whilst you were at sea. Be content, Ancient. The tin fish sank your *Nato*, but you have two other ships, and the *Mako* is as big a ship as the *Nato* and as fine."

"*C'est vrai*," replied Papa deGar. "I am but buying a small boat, with power of its own. A small launch, Monsieur Gamin, because it is a long row to land. Better, should it happen again, to have an engine, *n'est-ce-pas*? Did your arms not tire before we reached Manekita?"

"Torpedoed again, you mean?" Gamin exclaimed. "But that would not happen again to you, my friend, not in a million years."

"Aha," said Papa deGar with a broad smile, his eyes twinkling. "Maybe sooner than you think? You come with me, my true friend, and we shall buy the launch."

So, *monsieur*, he bought the launch. There was no money involved for the seller was Moy Jack, the Chinese, and

he knew Papa deGar's credit was as sound as a Rothschild's. Papa deGar drove the launch down the lagoon and out to his ship the *Mako*, of which he promptly took command.

"Monsieur Gamin," the Ancient said then, "the *Ma'o* is well supplied and tomorrow we put to sea. It is a voyage of health, with no destination or port, and I would wish that you come with me."

"But I," said Gamin, "have no cause to be at sea."

"Then," said Papa deGar, "it must be a request. I must request you to come to sea with me, Monsieur Gamin, for you are my friend, and into your hands I would put my ships and my men if anything should happen to me."

"What will happen to you, old one?" Gamin asked. "You have lived a long day, and you will probably live forever."

"One does not live forever," replied the Ancient, "when one has made a fearful oath to the gods Maui the First, Maui the Second, and Maui the Third. Please, *mon ami*."

Monsieur Gamin could not, of course, refuse, for it was a request based upon friendship, and one did not refuse such requests. On the following morning, Gamin put to sea with Papa deGar, Atea, Tomi, and all the others, the crew of the *Nato* mingling with the crew of the *Mako*.

IT was a strange voyage for Monsieur Gamin, for the men were all happy and joyous as though they shared some strange secret, but what it was Gamin did not know. Then, too, there was the mystery of the launch which the Ancient had purchased from Moy Jack. The launch was not aboard.

For long hours Gamin had stared at it astern, in the wash of the

schooner. It was not merely roped to a stern cleat, mind you this, but the Ancient had rigged a long stout pole, some three inches thick, from the stern of the *Mako* to the bow of the launch. And when Gamin asked why, Papa deGar replied with a faint smile, "Because I do not wish slack, *monsieur*."

Aha, you say, *monsieur*. You see the end of the tale, *non*? The Ancient has loaded the launch with high explosives, you say, and that is why he does not want slack. But you are wrong. That is not it. It is not as simple as that. The launch was absolutely empty. Monsieur Gamin saw that for himself, for it was not a big launch, perhaps twelve feet, and you could see the single engine in its belly, and the thwarts, and then the flooring, and nothing else.

Not even, *monsieur*, a water keg.

Was that not a strange sort of life-boat, eh? No water keg, no tins of biscuits.

Gamin heard Atea say, on the second night, when clouds rolled up, "Captain Papa, we shall have to cut the launch loose if it storms, for the pole will surely break."

And Papa deGar said, "We will not cut loose the launch until I have kept my oath with the three gods Maui."

On the third day, they sighted the spit of Manekita and then sheered for the west. "Do you not remember this place?" the Ancient said.

"I shall never forget it," Gamin said fervently. "But *mon dieu*, old one, why do you scout these dangerous waters! It was here the great submersible came upon us and sank the *Nato*! Do you wish to have your *Mako* sunk, too, from under you? What sort of voyaging is this?"

"We are fishing," said Papa deGar. "We hunt a big fish!"

"A tin fish?" asked Gamin appre-

hensively. He was being worried now.

"Who knows?" said the Ancient with a shrug. "Maui wills what comes, not this poor Vaitian warrior."

"Mmm," said Gamin and shivered. He glanced aloft. How easily the spotless white sails could be seen from some distant periscope, barely above the surface. And the flags, not one flag of France, but the tricolor in three places. An invitation, veritably, for destruction.

The wind held nicely, and the storm which had threatened on another night did not show itself. By day, the skies were blue and life was good, and at night the darkness closed in like a friendly and infinite armor, and Monsieur Gamin could breathe a trifle more easily.

Too easily. It began to play upon the strings of Monsieur Gamin's soul. On the A string of his heart, by the fourth fruitless day, he could feel weird and eerie strains, the shivering and macabre melodies of a mute *L'Apprentice Sorcier*, a soundless but nonetheless ominous *Danse Macabre*. *Oui*, Monsieur Gamin's beating heart seemed to take on the tragic quality of the bassoon in its lowest register. He found himself smoking his pipe too much, and shaking a little as if from some dread expectation. Passionately he wished that Papa deGar would forget the oath to Maui and would put back into Papeete to go about living the rest of what had been a wonderful and peaceful life.

Ah, but the Ancient was of no such mind. When one of gentle moods is stirred to plans of violence, it is a fact that such grim determination cannot be shaken, for men of gentle moods are men of decision.

On the fifth day, late in the afternoon, the tin fish came. And Monsieur

Gamin knew the fate of the *Mako* was sealed.

IN THE west where the sinking sun was painting the sky in garish colors, the submersible burst to the surface in a rolling patch of spray. *Mais oui*, it was a fine and thrilling sight to see the black bulk of the U-boat break the glassy and magenta-colored surface of that placid sea. One moment, there was only the vast watery mirror, and the next, *pan!*, up she came, huge and ominous, with white water spilling from her conning tower and her decks and her gun.

Papa deGar said, "Atea, break off the pole and keep the launch ready. I, the Ancient, have a rendezvous with the gods Maui."

The Ancient's face was calm and relaxed and there was the smile again in his eyes. *Mon dieu*, the cool courage of that old lover of the sea and ships! It was as if he were going to an island festival. And there, in the sea, the deadly tin fish lay.

Quickly the men poured out of her tower, the crew running to the forward gun. A man clambered high on the tower and mounted a machine-gun and scanned the skies for hostile aircraft. Then there was the commander in his blue uniform and his binoculars, scanning the *Mako* and waving hastily at the gunners.

The gun spoke, and the evening stillness was shattered by its sharp and reverberating roar. There was a burst of white water, a column of sea flung into the air, and the whistle of the shell fragments when the projectile exploded against the sea.

Papa deGar, at the helm, luffed the *Mako*, and she was a sun-painted ship upon the sea, her sails idle.

"Who is the captain of that ship?"

came the voice of the U-boat commander across the waters through his megaphone.

"I," bellowed Papa deGar. "Get out of the way and let me pass."

They drifted closer, and Monsieur Gamin could recognize the commander as von Fritsch. The German laughed. "My dear sir," he replied, "my country is at war with the flag you fly. There is no question of passing. Take to your boats at once and be grateful that I took the time to warn you. In ten minutes exactly, I will sink that bag of wood and send it to the bottom where it belongs. The captain of the ship will come to the submarine in his own boat to answer questions on the registry of the craft. Any failure to comply with these orders, and I will have you all machine-gunned. Lively!"

Papa deGar shook hands with his crew, and kissed Monsieur Gamin on both cheeks and said, "Goodbye, my children. You will lower the boats and make the attempt to leave the ship. But there is no necessity really. I go to see this crazy bedbug as I swore to, and we shall meet again in the Christian heaven. And recall, my children, in my absence, the Monsieur Gamin becomes the captain and you are his children from then on. *Adieu . . .*"

Papa deGar climbed down into the launch and started the engine. He cast off his line and he pulled away from the *Mako*. With the engine puttering miserably, he went off to greet the commander of the U-boat.

Captain von Fritsch held the glasses on the little launch and its occupant, and suddenly he smiled. "What's this?" he cried. "*Gott*, it is the same cannibal whose ship we destroyed last month! His white hair! I remember him well.

"That is hard luck for a single man, to lose another ship so quickly, *nein?*"

Ahoy there, cannibal! Hard luck, hard luck! It is good of you to bring your tonnage to me in this manner! Did you never hear the proverb: Once burned, twice shy? Yo do not learn. By all means, I must spare you, for who knows, you may bring still another ship this way!"

"*Monsieur*," called Papa deGar tranquilly, "you have made a grave mistake. Once you called me a black man. Once you called me a native, a barbaric native. Tonight you call me a cannibal, which is untrue."

"And my mistake?"

"In not realizing, Herr Bedbug," cried Papa deGar, "that I am, in the end, a Frenchman!"

The launch had reached the side of the submarine and they bumped. Papa deGar had not reduced his speed; he struck the U-boat with as much speed as the launch could muster, which was not of a great deal, mind you, and yet a terrible, ghastly miracle occurred.

MONSIEUR GAMIN had seen that belly of that launch was absolutely empty and yet the most terrific explosion shook the twilight. It was an explosion, which, at that short range, nearly shattered the eardrums of Monsieur Gamin. He had a horribly confused picture of men flying through the air in chunks and pieces, and as he watched, the submarine melted and disappeared, the conning tower disintegrating first, the deck gun vanishing, the men swept into atoms by the force of the blow.

And then, over the sea, the rain of shattered steel began to fall. On the decks of the *Mako* the pellets began to thud, and every man took cover. It was inconceivable that anyone on that submarine could have lived to tell the

tale, but one man did, a Lieutenant Heimler. He was picked up and carried to Papeete later, and after the war, he wrote of the sinking for the German Admiralty records.

Afterward, the evening was filled with a roaring stillness. And on the surface of the fading purple sea, there was only oil.

Monsieur Gamin would never have solved this mystery if it had not been for Atea who told him, "Did you never notice, Captain Gamin, the cable at the bow and stern of the launch? When we left Papeete for three weeks after the *Nato* died, we went fishing, true enough, and we found what Papa deGar was after. The tor-pe-do which missed the *Nato* that first time. You recall?"

"I recall," Gamin said.

"We picked it up, but we did not know how to make it run again. So Papa deGar, that Ancient, bought the launch and we hung the torpedo under it with cable, the nose sticking out in front, under the water. And Papa deGar himself gave motion to the tor-pe-do and directed it, until it struck the U-boat, and thus he kept his oath to the gods of Maui."

Captain Gamin could not forget the smile on the Ancient's face when he headed the launch toward destruction.

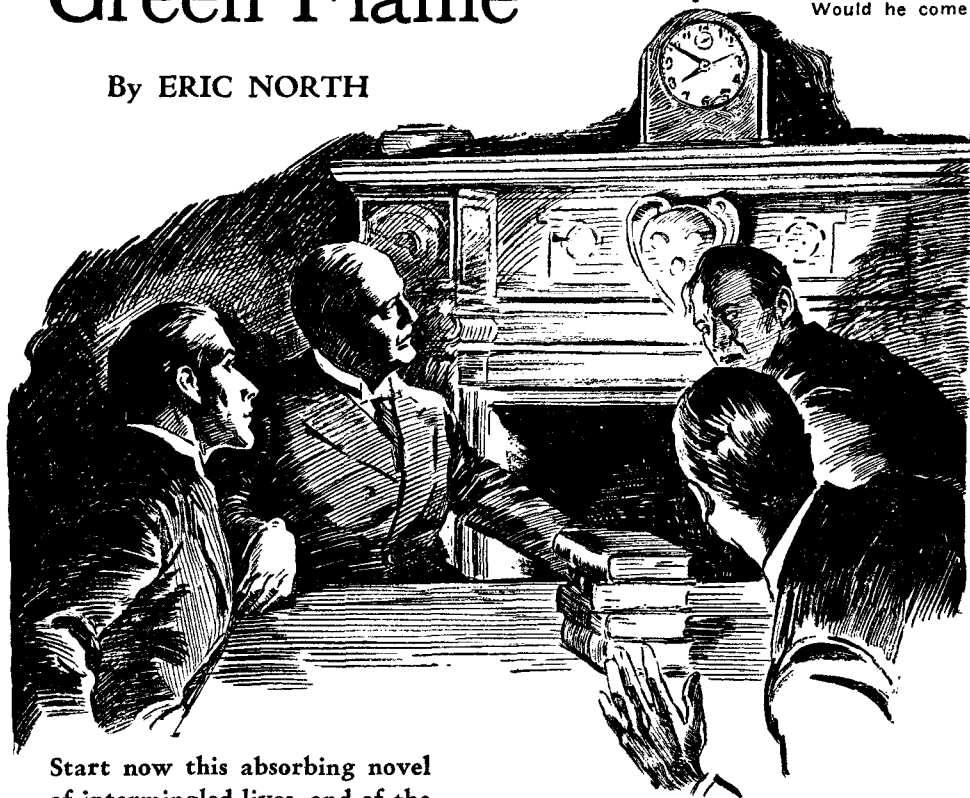
Eh, *monsieur*? But yes, it is a strange tale, and one not easy to believe. But I know it to be true, quite true. And so, with the word of Lt. Heimler in the records, I do not think the Reich will send its submarines back here again. Not when men like the Ancient keep such fearful oaths to the gods Maui.

The Green Flame

By ERIC NORTH

THE
TOAD

We were tense
with the approach
of that hour.
Would he come?



Start now this absorbing novel
of intermingled lives, and of the
destruction that nearly overtook
the world

I AM writing this in an effort to relieve myself of the horror which poisons my mind at thought of TOAD. I have seen the incredibly ghastly—

But that will appear shortly. I arrived in Melbourne, Australia, on an evening in late November: MAURICE JOHN MURCHISON, aged thirty, reasonably personable; with good background but without present employment.

After nightfall, still without a place to stay, I wandered into Alexandra Gardens and sat down for a quiet smoke. Within a few minutes I had met GEORGE FRAMLING, young secretary to the premier; CRAMPTON, a park policeman; and old STEPHEN GREGORY, director of the Bureau of Chemical Science, whom Framling had come agitatedly to seek.

This story began in the *Argosy* for February 24

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THEN it happened. Gregory, having spoken lightly of a threatening letter from a person named TOAD, paused to take medicine from a small phial—and burst into flames! There before our eyes a spurt of jade-green fire erupted from his mouth and consumed him utterly, leaving not a trace of the man who had stood with us only a few seconds before.

When we had recovered somewhat from the shock, Framling urged me to say nothing about the horrible occurrence; and recommended me to NANCY CARLISLE on Monray Street, who had a room to let. I found her attractive and kind, and lost no time in moving in.

There were strange things about that house, however. Her father, old RUFUS CARLISLE, a religious fanatic who talked of flood and fire destroying the world. His friend, one MERTZ, who had formerly roomed in the place and whom Carlisle still saw outside.

a furtive man, whose face Nancy had never seen clearly.

There was one other roomer: MISS MOL-LIE HOLLIDEW, a chorus girl, who was being courted unsuccessfully by a wealthy but inarticulate youth, CUTHBERT WEINSEIDLE.

FRAMLING called for me next day and took me to the Treasury building for a meeting with the premier, MORGAN HANNAFORD; PROFESSOR BRANDEN, a chemist; SIR HECTOR CORRILEES, commissioner of police; and SENIOR-DETECTIVE RALPH HERMANN.

Hannaford took me into their counsel, with a nominal position as assistant to Framling but actually to help ferret out TOAD. We were all pledged to secrecy, so as not to arouse public alarm; and there was a fake funeral arranged for Gregory.

We had few clues to the identity of TOAD. There were several threatening notes (one of them had been addressed to Gregory) demanding up to £800,000 on pain of dreadful calamity. And one curt telegram. Gregory had tried to run him down—and had paid the price.

Professor Branden had had a classmate in chemistry whose nickname was Toad—a shrewd but loathsome fellow with red irises. But Branden knew of nothing—science knew of nothing—that could produce the effect we had seen on poor Gregory.

WHILE Detective Hermann was checking the records of the University for clues to TOAD, Mona Framling, pretty young wife of the premier's secretary, was decoyed to an empty house in an unsavory neighborhood. Here she was held captive by a Chinese, who demanded that she write a note calling her husband to this place.

Through information given us by Cuthbert Weinseidle, Nancy Carlisle and I reached the house in time to frighten away the Chinese and save Mona. When she told us the story later, there were two significant details:

The voice that had called her on the phone resembled that of Mertz; and the Chinese had red eyes. . . .

CHAPTER VI

PREPARE FOR PERDITION!

NEXT day I began duty supposedly as assistant to Framling, in the premier's department. In reality I had something to do with

routine affairs of state. My instructions were to keep strict watch upon strangers entering the Treasury buildings.

I was asked privately by Sir Hector Corrilees to be particularly watchful over the premier while he was on the premises. The chief commisioner did not say outright that he feared an attempt to harm Mr. Hannaford, but the fact was fairly evident.

In addition to me three plainclothes policemen were stationed in and about the premier's section of the building. The premier's messenger held strict orders to admit no one to Mr. Hannaford's room who had not first been approved either by Framling or by me.

I suppose no gloomier, no more ill-ventilated architecture exists anywhere in Melbourne than the Treasury buildings. I found the atmosphere of the place depressing in the extreme, and eminently suited to the tragic circumstances responsible for my attendance there.

I had been given a small desk in the messenger's cubicle, and a number of ancient files had been lent to me for the sake of appearances. For the most part, however, I spent my time walking up and down the dismal, drafty corridors, chatting unostentatiously with one or other of the plainclothes men, or following some particularly villainous countenance about its business.

In such manner a whole fortnight went by without incident of any kind. Toad had apparently withdrawn into his hole, for there was neither sight nor sign of him. Since the sneering telegram received by the premier, even the mails had been silent.

Framling and I began to breathe more freely. We told each other that Toad was the usual kind of crank,

after all; that, as his kind almost invariably did, he had gone off on some other *ignis fatuus* of his disordered imagination, and must already have forgotten us.

Not that we really believed this. At the back of our minds remained ever the abominable taint of poor Gregory's death, and the menace that had faced Mona. These were facts from which there was no escaping. If we knowingly blinked at them it was because we wanted to bolster our courage.

The reason for this respite has never been made plain. The premier and Sir Hector Corrilees later subscribed to the belief that Toad had fallen ill. Hermann, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the silence was a deliberate attempt to infect our resolution further, this time with the bacillus of indecision.

I incline to this myself. Indecision, waiting for the unknown to happen, is notoriously demoralizing in its effect. This would have been a metaphysical move quite in keeping with what I know of Toad's mental strategy.

DURING this fortnight I found unhindered opportunity to establish myself in Nancy's good graces. From the first the attraction had been mutual, and I was now finding friendship too barren a name for the feeling she inspired in me.

I had good sense enough, however, to progress slowly. Even had Nancy then returned my love, I had nothing to offer her in the way of worldly possessions. I had yet to make any real progress toward success, and it was important to me that I gain some standing before offering marriage.

But there was a second, more ominous consideration.

Nancy was becoming more and more

anxious about her father. The course of Rufus Carlisle's aberration no longer ran smoothly, but showed a new and alarming impetus. Whereas formerly his outbursts of prophetic declamation had come at stated times, he now indulged them irregularly and without warning. His manner grew painfully excited, and there were times when he frankly raved.

The difficulty of managing him increased daily. I could see that Nancy's fear was that her father's obvious insanity must inevitably, sooner or later, attract the attention of the authorities, and that he would be taken from her and placed under restraint. She went white-faced and tremulous with the fret of it.

Rufus Carlisle had become a stranger to the sublimely comforting assurance of religion. The man was obsessed by thought of the world's impending doom. He gloried in it with the fierce joy of the fanatic. He was the keeper and dispenser of the secret councils of wrath incarnate, and the envisaging of death and destruction roused him to overpowering madness.

My first indication of the old man's increasing disorder came one Saturday, shortly before midnight. I was talking with Cuthbert and Mollie Hollidew, who had shortly before returned from the theater, while Nancy had gone to the kitchen to prepare supper.

Rufus Carlisle had been absent since early in the afternoon, and Nancy was more than a little anxious about him. To pacify her I had promised that if he had not returned by twelve o'clock I would borrow Cuthbert and his car, and go quietly in search of him. I had a feeling, however, that he would appear safely before that hour. And so, indeed, it proved.

Mollie Hollidew, I remember, was

in a bad temper. The company had opened that night in a new show with the engaging title of *Step On It, Maudie*, and a new leading lady billed as Nonie Mayhew. Certain flowers and chocolates, which Miss Hollidew thought destined for herself, had gone instead to the leading lady.

She said: "I bet you couldn't find a less greedy girl than me anywhere in the world, Mr. Murchison; but, as I told Cuthbert, coming home, I'm not altogether blind and dumb. Did I, or did I not, see that man smiling at me and shouting encore?"

Cuthbert said, supremely distraught: "Undoubtedly . . . sure, Mollie . . . undoubtedly . . ."

At which Mollie began to sniff into an absurd handkerchief.

It was at this unpropitious moment that Rufus Carlisle entered. Invariably on his return he went straight up the stairs to his bedroom. Tonight saw a drastic alteration.

I think he was quite oblivious of our presence in the sitting room. For a second, as he stumbled toward the piano, I caught his look; but there was no recognition in it. His mind was turned inward upon itself in a kind of visionary ecstasy.

He fell on his knees by the piano stool, and his thin voice rose in a flood of disjointed words.

"Behold, the end of all things is at hand . . . with mine own eyes have I seen the flame. . . . For the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up . . ."

Miss Hollidew was actually so startled that she pulled her skirts over her knees. She said in a loud, indignant whisper: "The awful old thing . . . of all the cheek . . . saying things like

that right out in front of respectable people . . ."

Cuthbert sat as if paralyzed.

The trembling voice went on and on:

"Because of their wickedness men shall cease. . . . As it was in the days of Noah . . ."

Madness, without doubt; and yet I could not escape a kind of superstitious awe. I had, too, a sense of intrusion. It did not seem quite decent, somehow, to be listening to this intimate craziness of a human soul.

I WAS on the point of going for Nancy, when she came quietly into the room. It made my heart ache to see how wan she looked. She laid her hand gently on the shaking shoulders.

"Daddy . . . come, dear, you're so tired. You must get to bed. I've saved such a nice supper . . ."

If he heard he took no notice.

"For the two shall be one, and the one two. Fire shall be water, and water fire. There shall be perdition of unrighteous men, and they that mock shall be reserved unto fire against the great day of judgment . . ."

Nancy said, a catch in her voice:

"Daddy . . . See, it's bedtime. You're so tired . . ."

She tugged at his arm, and of a sudden the reedy voice wavered and was still. Rufus Carlisle rose unsteadily to his feet, staring at us with bent brows.

"Your supper is all ready, Father."

"Even these shall know perdition," old Carlisle mumbled, pointing at us with a skeleton hand. "Even these, your friends, Nancy, for they know not righteousness, neither have they been purged by flames."

Nancy said: "Yes, dear. You must tell them tomorrow. for now you're so tired."

He allowed her to lead him away then. He walked like a man asleep, leaning heavily on her slightness.

"Well, I'm darned," Miss Hollidew said, breaking the silence. "You'll excuse me, Mr. Murchison . . . But, really, did you ever. Cuthbert, give me a cigarette. Mark me, the old boy is stark, staring mad, even if he is Nancy's father, and me as fond of her as if she was my own sister.

"Purged by flames, indeed! He wants purging with a straitjacket. I call it downright insulting. Considering the company he keeps, I'd like to know who he thinks he is, wanting to burn up his betters . . . I would so. Eh, Cuthbert?"

Thus imperishably the King's English, as from the scornful lips of Miss Hollidew.

Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

I said: "What do you mean—the company he keeps?"

Mollie nodded wisely.

"I saw him coming out of a joint the other day, chin and nose, as they say, with a Chinaman. At last, if it wasn't a Chinaman it was so near to it you couldn't have told the difference. Hobnobbing away in great style. Now, I ask you, Mr. Murchison—ain't there plenty of his own color to talk to, when he feels chatty?"

I forget what I answered to this. The news was disturbing. And yet there was more than one Chinese in Melbourne. Why should old Carlisle's be Mona Framling's? All the same, I had a queer feeling that the two were identical.

Presently Cuthbert departed, and Mollie Hollidew went yawning to bed. I remained in the sitting room, smoking and thinking. But there didn't appear to be a logical conclusion for any of my theories and deductions. In fact,

the more I puzzled the more confused I became.

I was surprised, on looking at my watch, to see that it was two o'clock on Sunday morning. I imagined that the rest of the household was long since in bed and asleep, and the sudden appearance of Nancy startled me. It was evident that she had been crying, for her pretty eyes were red and swollen. When she saw me she exclaimed confusedly.

"Maurice, I didn't know you were here. I saw the light and thought you'd forgotten to turn it out."

I asked: "How is your father?"

She clasped her hands, looking at me earnestly.

"Maurice, I'm so frightened about him. He seems so queer, and he has been talking so wildly."

I said something, I don't remember what, in an effort to comfort her. My heart was heavy as I went to my room.

CHAPTER VII

MADMAN'S MIND

EARLY in the afternoon, on Wednesday of Toad's third week of silence, I stood for a half hour or so, talking to the little knot of police who were stolidly watching a number of unemployed staging a demonstration in front of the Treasury buildings.

These unfortunates, foiled in an attempt to interview the premier, resolved themselves into a meeting of protest. One of their number climbed upon a lamp post and from this vantage point treated his fellows to a violent harangue. At length, glancing defiantly toward us, he added a kind of benediction—or malediction:

"Revolution, says you. Worse'n that by a long chalk, I'm telling you, if things ain't altered. I know what I

know. I've heard of a bloke that reckons he's got hold of something that'll knock the guv'ment rotten . . . aye, and the whole darned country beside, if they ain't careful. I don't know what it is, but I'm just telling you."

There was more to the same effect, but I had had enough. I thought, as I went back into the drafty corridors, how sinister it was that at all points I sensed threat of Toad.

It was sheer absurdity to connect this rambling utterance with the horrific machinations of the creature with whom our little band was contending. And yet I found myself doing so. I was soaked through and through with the poison of Toad.

The seven sworn to find an antidote for that poison met in the premier's room at eight o'clock in the evening. The blinds were tightly drawn, and a plainclothes man was on guard outside the door. Mr. Hannaford, whose manner betrayed the nervous strain which he was undergoing, briefly reviewed the facts as we then knew them.

He added: "No further communication has been received by me. Professor Branden, have you discovered the nature of the liquid used to destroy Mr. Gregory, or the means by which it was substituted for his ordinary medicine?"

From this point onward Framling and I took turns in recording what was said.

"As regards the liquid," Branden said slowly, "I have discovered nothing. It is evidently an evaporative, since no trace of it was found in analysis of the gravel where Mr. Gregory was annihilated. The nature of it is utterly beyond me to determine. Science has no answer for the astounding facts. They are apparently not to be explained by any known

formulae; being, in fact, totally opposed to the science of chemistry."

He cleared his throat, adjusted his pince-nez with a slightly trembling hand, and resumed: "I think, however, I can account for the substitution . . . if it was a substitution and not merely an introduction. Gregory always compounded his own medicines. He had, as perhaps you know, a slight dropsy of the heart and regularly took small portions of rosemary wine.

"He was pronouncedly in favor of herbal remedies, and obtained supplies of the herbs he required from a Chinese herbalist of good repute. I have satisfied myself that this man is beyond suspicion.

"In addition to the rosemary wine, Gregory prepared a very concentrated tincture of certain herbs. It was his custom to prepare a number of doses and keep these in tiny bottles in readiness for taking. When going out he slipped one of these bottles into his waistcoat pocket. When a dose became due he simply emptied the contents of the bottle at a gulp.

"As you also know, Mr. Hannaford, Gregory lived alone in city lodgings. He was without relatives . . . a fact which was of enormous help to us in keeping the circumstances of his death secret. I interviewed the landlady last week and elicited some interesting but useless details of his private life.

"ONE particular, however, is worth mentioning. On the morning of Gregory's death, while he was absent, a Chinese came to the house. He informed Mrs. Brent, the landlady, that he came with a fresh supply of herbs for Gregory, and asked permission to place these in Gregory's bedroom. He gave as excuse for his personal attention an alleged need that certain of the

herbs must be disposed in a certain manner, otherwise their virtue became impaired.

"This, I need hardly say, is sheer rubbish. Mrs. Brent was, however, quite agreeable. Chinese had frequently called upon a similar errand, although she does not remember to have seen this particular man before. He was in Gregory's room, she says, a matter of seconds only. She personally saw him from the premises."

Professor Branden shrugged.

"Now . . . you see how easily substitution could have been effected. Gregory's habit of taking his medicine from small phials taken from his waistcoat pocket was widely known. Indeed, it was somewhat of a joke in luncheon circles in the city, for more than once he had been known to interrupt himself in an after-dinner speech to swallow his prescribed dose at the prescribed hour.

"To my mind, gentlemen, the fact that he was late in taking his medicine on the evening of the tragedy shows that he was unduly abstracted. He had, I believe, definitely identified Toad. Had he lived another hour, perhaps, that information would now be in our possession. It was fated that he was to die before he could reveal it.

"To return . . . Observe, then, how easy it would have been for Gregory's caller to take from his dressing table the first in order of the little row of phials that were always there in readiness—in the sequence of their freshness—and replace it with an identical phial containing—whatever it was. Gregory returns and has his lunch. He then places in his pocket the phial containing his evening dose, and again leaves the house. The rest we know."

The premier sat silently, his chin in his hand. He looked a sick man.

Sir Hector Corriless, smoking his inevitable cigar, said: "Thank you, Branden. That certainly clears part of the ground for us. Hermann, have you progressed at all?"

The detective began with the statement that he had narrowed the University class lists down to some thirty-five names.

"This is going to be a longer task than I thought. Only the necessity for secrecy holds me to it personally. Apart from this, I have nothing to report, except an unpleasant incident which occurred to Mr. Framling's wife. The facts are already known to Sir Hector. Mrs. Framling has given us her side of the story. With your permission, Mr. Hannaford, I'll read it to you."

The premier stirred. He said in a low voice: "Go on, Mr. Hermann, please."

Hermann, having finished reading, then related his own and Framling's share of the adventure.

"In all this," Mr. Hannaford said, when Hermann had fallen silent, "Chinese figure. Is Toad, then, a Chinese? If so, it appears to dispose of Professor Branden's theory that he is identical with the man so nicknamed in his chemistry classes."

The detective said: "Not necessarily, I think. Let us say, for example, that Toad assumes the disguise in order to impose upon Gregory's landlady and effect the desired substitution. Having done so, it occurs to him that he might with advantage continue in the role. In general, to Western eyes, one Asiatic is as like to another as peas in a pod.

"In certain types of Westerners, sir, it is not very difficult to give an Eastern touch. If already the cheekbones are high and the skin of the face muddy, deception is made easy. This

man may have a knack for masquerading. Many criminals have."

"I think there is small doubt that Gregory's Chinese and Mrs. Framling's Chinese are identical," said Sir Hector Corriless. "Mrs. Framling speaks of the man's red eyes. Surely these are the eyes which attracted attention to Branden's classmate. Eh, Branden? It looks like your Toad, doesn't it?"

THE professor nodded. His eyes, however, were abstracted. He was still mentally engaged upon the problem of the amber-colored fluid, I knew; for he had been muttering disjointedly to himself for some time.

Here and there I caught a word—I am bound to say without making much sense of them. He appeared to be of an exhaustive turn of mind.

He muttered now, staring at the wall: "Radioactivity . . . little traces of tangibility . . . chemical reactions . . . transmutation of primary elements . . ."

He seemed to linger on the last, whatever it might mean, for he repeated it several times.

"Well, gentlemen, what now?" the premier said wearily. "We must, I suppose, concentrate upon discovering this pseudo-Chinese? Should that be very difficult?"

"I would rather," Professor Branden said, rousing himself, "discover Toad's laboratory. There lies our real danger. The man himself is powerless without the means to harm. We must discover and destroy this poison at its source."

If we had understood then—as we were soon to do—the appalling nature of the amber fluid, we must have talked less calmly. No one of us, I think, rated Toad as anything more than a menace to the individual. We saw him as a madman possessed of some new and

subtle poison, who might destroy life here and there until his demands were acceded to. We had no conception of the magnitude of his true perspective.

Sir Hector Corriless said: "We can only continue as we are doing until Toad emerges from his silence. I have hopes that he may be dead. In view of the peremptory nature of his last message, and the blatant admission of guilt contained in the telegram received by the premier, it is strange that nothing has since been heard of him."

"Who can gauge the mind of a lunatic," said Mr. Hannaford, with a shrug. "No, Sir Hector, he is not dead. Would to God he were. I cannot think of poor Gregory yet without a retching at my vitals. What hellish potion could he have taken that destroyed all traces of him within a few moments? It is utterly outside human experience."

"I agree," Branden said quietly.

"It seems to me," Framling said, "we should all be wary in eating and drinking. I shall have to install an official taster, like the old kings who lived in fear of being poisoned."

He laughed as he said this, but without mirth.

Hermann shook his head.

"As I said before, a second substitution won't be easy. It won't be that way, Mr. Framling. To begin with, we are forewarned of the possibility, which Gregory was not. There is the risk, too, of his plot failing and the stuff falling into our hands.

"Besides, he has nothing to gain by killing us; rather the contrary. If ever we find out who he is and where he is . . . Then, perhaps. But not yet. All we can do now is to work and wait. We shall hear from him soon enough, when it suits him."

We parted at that.

On reaching home I found Nancy

rather upset; and with small wonder. I have persuaded her to set down herself the events of that evening, which occurred in my absence. To my mind they have a distinct bearing on the whole story of Toad.

Nancy's statement follows:

CHAPTER VIII

PURSUIT OF MERTZ

MAURICE has asked me to record what little I know of Mr. Mertz, and to explain, if I can, something of the relations which existed between Mr. Mertz and my poor father.

I think whatever influence Mr. Mertz had was evil. This is pure assumption on my part, for I have nothing really tangible to offer in proof. Say, if you like, that my woman's intuition upholds the belief.

Instinct warned me from the very beginning that Mr. Mertz was undesirable. I remember the day—some three years before Maurice came—when I answered a knock on the door, and opened it to see Mr. Mertz on the step.

He wore an overcoat, with the collar turned up around his neck, and a felt hat that was pulled well down over his forehead. I saw nothing of his face by the thick-lensed spectacles which he always affected. The lenses of these were very large and round, and gave him a queer, owlish appearance. He was short and squat in build, and his voice was soft . . .

This is my only impression of Mr. Mertz. I never once saw him without his overcoat and hat. During the three years that he boarded with us he never once, to my knowledge, entered the sitting room. He left the house early, after taking breakfast in his bedroom, and returned invariably late at night.

He never spoke to me, unless I first spoke to him; and then but briefly. His behavior was faultless. He paid his board faithfully each week.

And yet I detested him. He seemed to carry with him a kind of sinister atmosphere. I was always expecting some horrible revelation—of what, I cannot even now conceive. A sort of repressed wickedness, perhaps. But no revelation came. The man went his own way, whatever it was, and kept his own counsel. If he had a secret vice he kept it well hidden.

For the first two years he came and went in this manner, without seeming to notice Father or me, except indirectly. Father was only at the beginning of his illness, then. He was very quiet and self-effacing. But his poor old head was growing steadily worse all the time.

It was pitiful to watch. I just made up my mind to humor him. It was doing nobody any harm if he liked to conduct a little service all to himself, kneeling at the piano stool in the sitting room, and afterward playing and singing hymns. It brought comfort to him.

One morning Mr. Mertz unexpectedly returned to the home—I suppose, for something he had forgotten. Father was right in the middle of his devotions, and I was dusting the bannisters on the first landing of the stairs.

I don't think Mr. Mertz saw me—indeed, I know he did not. The sitting-room door was open, and I saw him stand there looking in at Father in exactly the same half-amused, half-curious way that Maurice was to emulate later. He stood for quite five minutes . . .

And I stood, too, watching him in turn. I wanted to say that I considered his action prying and impertinent, but

somehow the words wouldn't come. I seemed to understand that some extraordinary train of thought had seized him, and that his mood would not brook interference. I was, in a way, frightened.

While I was trying to reassure myself, Father made an end of his prayers. Mr. Mertz called in a soft voice: "Why, Mr. Carlisle, so you're an Adventist, are you?"

Father mumbled something in reply, but I could not distinguish what he said. At that moment I was prompted to draw back from the bannisters into the shadow of the landing. I had scarcely done so when Mr. Mertz turned and looked deliberately up and down, as if to make sure he was unobserved.

Apparently he was satisfied that I was nowhere about, for he turned once more to Father, who had come out into the vestibule. They talked for a little time, very softly and almost secretively, I thought. I could only catch an odd word here and there.

Presently Mr. Mertz turned again toward the foot of the stairs. He said quite plainly now: "Come and talk in my room this evening, Mr. Carlisle. I wish I'd known of this before."

Father replied: "I will . . . I will."

He was very excited and his voice shook.

I didn't wait any longer, for Mr. Mertz was coming up the stairs. I crept softly ahead and went into my own room and shut the door very gently. I heard him pass. A few moments later, he came back and down the stairs, and I heard the front door close after him.

I came out then. Father was still standing in the vestibule. I spoke to him, but his poor mind was clouded again. He just looked at me in his vague, gentle way without answering.

I made him lie down for a while, and I think he slept. After he had had his lunch he went out, as usual, to sit and read in the gardens.

I hadn't the heart to worry him with questions. I couldn't see that it mattered very much, one way or the other, if he became friendly with Mr. Mertz.

FATHER spent several hours that night in Mr. Mertz's room. It became a regular proceeding, after a while, that they should sit and talk into the small hours. Quite often I sat in the kitchen until two or three in the morning, waiting for Father to come out of Mr. Mertz's room, so I could give him his supper and make sure that he was comfortably settled in bed.

Father never referred to these talks with Mr. Mertz. I began to notice a change in his manner, however. He became more—what is the word? More militant. That's it: more militant.

For a long time past he had been wrapped up in prophecy and all that kind of thing. He was always expecting and praying for the end of the world to come. But hitherto it had been in a mild, rambling manner, as a child looks forward to a picnic or a treat of some kind.

The talks with Mr. Mertz—at least, I suppose it was that—changed all this. He began to declaim and denounce and threaten. The world was a sink of iniquity, and the sooner it was destroyed the better. He was dreadfully worked up about it all at times.

I was terrified that someone unsympathetic would overhear him and call in the authorities. I couldn't bear the thought that he would be taken away from me and shut up.

I had promised Mother to look after him and prevent his hurt, if I could. But she had not known that his mind

would be touched. She was thinking only of his bodily good. In spite of all the anxiety he had given her she had loved him dearly. It was her death that finally crushed him.

And then one day Mr. Mertz left us. He gave me no reason for doing so. He merely said that he was going elsewhere, and I was at liberty to let his room as soon as I liked. I was glad to be quit of him, but a little worried lest Father should miss the strange companionship.

As it happened, Father did not seem to mind in the least. I soon found out that he was visiting Mr. Mertz in his new home. Father gave me the impression that he and Mr. Mertz shared some tremendous secret. His poor, dear eyes sparkled and glowed, and he began to look almost happy.

Once I asked him whether he knew where Mr. Mertz had gone, and whether he ever saw him now. He looked at me very cunningly and shook his head. But I knew he was deceiving me. Someone—I think it was Cuthbert Weinsidle—had seen him talking to Mr. Mertz in the city . . .

Detective Hermann asked me once whether I thought that Mr. Mertz was identical with the man who disguised himself as a Chinese and trapped Mona Framling. I said I didn't know.

Nor do I. I only grow confused when I try to decide. Mona declared positively that the voices were the same; but the two men were so opposed in other ways that I do not see how it can have been possible.

The eyes of the Chinese were peculiarly red. I never saw Mr. Mertz without his thick glasses.

I COME now to the evening when Maurice was engaged at the premier's office. Mr. Mertz had then been

gone about a month. It was fairly early, and Mollie Hollidew was in the sitting room waiting for Cuthbert to come with his car to drive her to the theater.

Father was in the kitchen—or so I thought. I was tidying myself in my room. Father had been rather more of an anxiety than usual that day, and I was trying to decide the best thing to do.

Obviously something had to be done, for he was steadily growing more violent and unreasonable. I decided to talk things over frankly with Maurice, and seek his advice. I was, needless to say, a good deal dejected and sad. Poor old Daddy.

I had just finished dressing when I heard someone coming up the stairs almost at a run. Mollie Hollidew fairly burst into my bedroom and flung herself down into the cane chair by the window. She was quite purple with anger at something or other and could hardly speak at first.

I said: "Why, Mollie, whatever is wrong? Have you quarreled with Cuthbert again?"

"It isn't Cuthbert," she fairly flung at me. "It's your father, Nancy. Look here: I'm fond of you and all that, but there's a limit. I may not be Victoria the Good, or Helen of Troy, or the Queen of Sheba, or any of those heroines of virtue, and so on, but I won't stand for being called a scarlet woman for anybody or anything."

I said: "Good heavens! Whoever called you a scarlet woman?"

Mollie was biting at her lip and tearing at the gloves in her hand.

She shrieked: "I'll have the law, that's what I'll do. I won't be called a Jezebel and a whited sepulchre. Whited indeed! My complexion is as natural as the next girl's."

"For goodness sake," I said, "try to be calm and talk sensibly. Who has been saying all this to you?"

"Your father," she said. She was on the verge of hysterics. "That old prayer-mongering . . ."

I hate putting all this down, but I promised Maurice to relate truthfully everything that led up to my adventure that night. Poor Father . . . I was aghast. I don't know what to say or do. This was the worst that had happened.

And all the while Mollie went on shrieking and throwing herself about.

"Here's me waiting like a lady for Cuthbert, and the old man comes in and gets to his prayers on the piano . . . Not that I mind that. If he wants to pray, I'm sure I've no objection. I dare say he needs all his prayers.

"I sat and smoked, trying to read a book. . . . And up he gets from his stool and pushes his finger at me and says: 'And the wicked shall be put down, and there shall be an end to the scarlet woman that lieth in wait and . . .'

"And a whole lot more of that rot. Pointing his old finger at me—I nearly slapped his face for him. And I'm giving a week's notice, and if Cuthbert's a man at all, this isn't the end of it. Not by a long chalk . . ."

I FELT sick. But the fact that Mollie knew so little reserve helped me. The humor of it came to my rescue. Mollie, with all her paint and powder, shrieking and kicking on the cane chair . . . But the poor soul wasn't deserving of her looks.

In a sense, too, I was fond of Mollie. She was as generous as daylight and very warm-hearted and forgiving. Besides, I could not afford to lose her. I had to depend on the board money

for our food and clothing. I wasn't able to go out and work like other girls, because I couldn't risk leaving Father to himself all day.

And so I said: "I'm awfully sorry. But you know how ill he is, Mollie. And very likely he never even saw you, you know. He was just talking to himself, as he often does, and you weren't in his poor mind at all. Indeed, I vow that must be so, for he is always telling me how he likes you . . ."

This was a shocking untruth, but what else was I to do? I went on playing upon Mollie's vanity and good nature.

"He'd be dreadfully upset if he thought you had taken all he said in a personal way. Why, Mollie, how perfectly absurd. You, of all people in the world . . . Can't you see how impossible it was that he was speaking of you?"

Well, in the end I brought her round. She wept with her head on my shoulder; I cried a little, too, if for a different reason. And that finally softened her.

She said: "Goodness, darling, what a brute you must think me. Of course I see now that the poor old man was just talking through his hat. My conscience, look at my nose . . . And I can hear Cuthbert's car hooting for me . . ."

She went off quite happily to the theater, and I summoned up all the harshness of which I was capable and went to have it out with Father. I was really angry with him. He was down again at the stool, in an ecstasy of prophecy. I had to shake him hard before I could rouse him.

I said: "Father, it is not right to call Mollie such things. How can you be so cruel and unjust? Really, I'm ashamed of you."

This was my great card. He hated me to say I was ashamed of him, poor dear; and now he hung his head and looked miserable.

I said: "Surely you were not really meaning what you said to Mollie, Father? You were just talking, weren't you, dear?"

His old eyes looked at me almost sanely. For months I hadn't caught such a look, and my heart leaped for joy. I am sure that in another moment I should have learned many things that puzzled me at the time, and still puzzle me.

But it was not to be. He was opening his mouth to answer me when the knocker banged at the street door. I opened it and saw Mr. Mertz.

He said, in his soft voice: "Good evening, Miss Carlisle. I promised your father, you know, that I would look in on him now and then. In fact, if he's at home, a walk might brighten him up. You might tell him I'm here."

I would have told him that Father was not at home, but it would have been useless. Father was at my elbow. He was trembling as if with a sudden new excitement. He said, in the high, thin voice which so distressed me: "Behold! The hour draweth near when all the . . ."

Mr. Mertz interrupted—hastily and sharply, I thought.

He said: "I've come to take you for a walk and a talk, Carlisle. That is, if Miss Nancy doesn't object?"

There was polite question in his voice, but his eyes behind their covering glasses were commanding. I felt a little shiver run down my spine, as if I had touched something wet and horrible and crawling sluggishly.

I said nothing, but helped Father on with his hat and overcoat. Mr. Mertz seemed to be smiling in the shadow of

his hat as he took Father by the arm.

THE door had scarcely closed upon them when I was racing upstairs to my room, in the sudden determination to follow them.

I cannot say what prompted me to do this. I think, perhaps, my patience was at an end. I thought that if I could learn something to Mr. Mertz's discredit I might use it as a threat to make him leave Father alone.

For by this time I was definitely assured that the association was in some way harmful to Father. I asked myself why Mr. Mertz should bother with Father at all, unless he had some ulterior motive. His interest dated from the time he had discovered Father's religious obsession, and he had been extraordinarily attentive since then.

Yet I could not for the life of me understand what it all meant.

I left the light burning in the vestibule. The house would be quite safe, and Maurice had his own key. I wished that Maurice could have been with me then. But even the thought of him gave me courage. I felt that he was somehow right at my side; as I know he was in spirit.

I forgot all about my promise to Detective Hermann not to go out alone at night. I was in too great a hurry to think of anything at all.

Fortunately, Father was a slow walker. I soon picked them up and followed some fifty yards behind. At Bourke Street Mr. Mertz helped Father into a street car. I was too late to catch it, but a second car for the same destination came up almost immediately. I stood on the platform outside, keeping a sharp lookout for Mr. Mertz and Father when they alighted. The roadway was fairly empty and we had

caught up to the car ahead and were following only a few feet in the rear.

In such manner I came presently into North Carlton. The conductor of my car asked me now where I proposed to get off. At a venture I said I was traveling to the terminus. I was told that we were then approaching it.

The conductor was young and quite evidently impressed by his own looks. I discovered that I was being invited to join in the impression. I am afraid I dispelled this hope rather rudely.

I was most concerned, not by his following crude pique, but by the fact that he obscured my view of people alighting from the car ahead. When finally he went grumbling about his business, I caught an instant's impression, as my car gathered way, of Mr. Mertz and Father walking toward a side street.

I rang the bell as once, but the car did not stop. The young conductor—glad, I suppose, to vent his ill humor—merely grinned at my frantic signals. I could have cried with vexation when the car deliberately ran past the next stopping place.

It became evident that I was being punished for ignoring the pimpled Adonis. My anger was so great that I would not yield him the satisfaction of admitting defeat. I waited until the car momentarily slowed, as it does to the panting of the great, tired cable, and stepped off, with a prayer in my heart.

I can still see the look of sour astonishment on the face of the conductor when I alighted without a mishap. Ignoring his shout of warning—I suppose he was frightened that his bad manners might have got him into serious trouble—I set off at a run along the block and a half dividing me from the lane where I had last seen Mr. Mertz and Father.

I found it presently. At least, it seemed to be the place. A high tin fence ran on either side and beyond were crazy, ill-favored buildings of the kind Maurice and I had seen in Padder-man's Lane, when Mona was rescued. I did not know what to do. Father might have been anywhere in the jumbled, vile-smelling darkness.

I looked at the houses on either side of the lane. They were both of brick and two-storied. Those along the lane were, as far as I could see, just tumble-down cottages.

I thought I must have been mistaken in thinking I saw them turn into the lane itself. The eyes play curious tricks by lamplight. It was, I thought, more likely that they had gone into one of the better class of houses on the main street.

My blood was up now, and I was resolved, if I could, to discover Father and assert my authority. I would take him home at once, Mr. Mertz or no Mr. Mertz. And I would tell Mr. Mertz in plain language that he must in the future leave Father alone. Father was not like other men. I had been careless of the fact. I would be careless no longer.

I SHUDDER now when I recall with what assurance I mounted the stone steps of the first house and tugged at the bell. I waited for some moments without getting any response. I was raising my hand to tug the bell again when the door opened stealthily and unexpectedly. I was confronted by an immensely stout and ugly woman, only half clothed, who stood and peered at me.

I said nervously: "Does Mr. Mertz live here, please?"

"Who, dearie?"

I can't describe the dreadful oiliness

of the creature's voice. It made my flesh creep.

I repeated the name.

She began to laugh—a shocking laugh.

She said: "Why, dearie, in course 'e does. And Mister Smith an' Mister Jones . . . all the boys and girls live here; and well you know it. Come right inside and hang up your 'at. It's a treat to see your pretty face . . ."

But I had had enough. My courage suddenly evaporated. I turned and bolted through the gate and along the road, with the creature screaming after me. I had a horrible fear that presently I should feel her coarse fingers tearing at me—dragging me back.

I was nearly fainting when I reached home. I went inside and sat down and cried. A fine little fool I'd made of myself, and I had been well punished.

I was recovering my composure when Maurice came in, and I told him what had happened. I naturally expected to find him all consolation. Instead of that he actually became angry. He said afterward that he almost wanted to beat me for putting myself to such a needless risk.

When people are greatly moved, their relief often puts them in a bad temper. I was too hurt and surprised to remember that. All I knew was that I was being scolded instead of petted. On top of the rest, it was too much altogether. I ran to my room and flung myself on the bed and howled.

And on this unhappy note my statement ends.

CHAPTER IX

SHADOW OF TERROR

WHEN Nancy had finished her story and had rushed crying up the stairs, I sat down and lit my pipe.

When she accused me of being angry she was quite right. I was angry. It appeared to me that her behavior was incredibly foolish, particularly in view of the stern warning given by Hermann to Mona and herself.

And so I sat and sulked, until my common sense intervened, when I was suddenly smitten with a horrified sense of having been brutal and unfeeling. In her distress Nancy had turned to me for comfort, and I had lost my temper and shouted at her.

After all, she had only followed the dictates of her love for her father. Any girl worth her salt would have done the same.

I slunk up the stairs and called apologies through the door. For a time she refused to answer. Then, I suppose, she took pity on my stupidity, for she presently emerged all prettily flushed and tear-stained, and actually began to beg my pardon for what she called her abominable temper.

She said: "You did quite right to scold me, Maurice. It was very foolish of me."

Well, all my good resolutions deserted me at that. I forgot everything except that I loved her. I just took her in my arms forthwith . . . And there we were, holding to each other, and saying all those dear, quaint, foolish thing that lovers manage to say. But this is not the story of my courtship and marriage . . .

It was late that night when old Rufus Carlisle returned. He seemed very tired and wan, I thought, and stared at us with even more abstraction than usual.

Nancy and I had agreed that it would be best not to question him. And so Nancy gave the old man his supper and saw him quietly to bed, as usual, without comment of any kind.

The next day passed without incident. On Saturday afternoon Nancy and I went to see George Framling and his wife. The fact of our engagement was so self-evident that we could not have denied it, even if we had wanted to.

Immediately it was definitely thus established, Mona Framling—as women will—inveigled Nancy apart for, I suppose, an exchange of confidences and a comparison of methods of manly proposal. I was much too happy to care. Framling and I were left to ourselves.

Framling said: "Well, Murchison, I must say you're a fast worker. I congratulate you. Next to my wife there isn't a girl I respect and admire more than Nancy Carlisle."

We chatted for some time, and then Framling was seized with an idea.

He said: "Look here, I've a notion to run into town to the gardens and hunt up Crampton, and the three of us talk things over. You'll be staying to tea with us, and the girls are quite comfortable together. We can spend an hour or so on Toad's trail."

I THOUGHT it a good idea. So, shortly after, we found ourselves in the Alexandra Gardens looking for Crampton. We found him without difficulty, and presently we were seated on the very bench where Framling and I had sat on the eve of Mr. Gregory's death.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and it was difficult to realize that such charm as surrounded us was associated with so shocking a tragedy.

Framling asked: "Well, Crampton, have you had any luck at all in solving this unhappy business? Nobody suspicious found on the prowl about this spot, I suppose?"

The park policeman shook his head. He was stolid-looking, with a hint of obstinacy in his square mouth and blunt nose, but an honest, dependable chap enough.

"Not a sign, Mr. Framling. I've kept a keen eye myself by day and night, and one of the other men has done the same—of course, without knowing anything of the facts. I can't say that anything unusual has happened.

"Well, I don't know. There's one rather queer thing. Very likely there's nothing in it, after all. I expect it's just that my sight's not too good, now I'm getting on in years. But it is queer."

He looked at us, I thought, a little defiantly.

"In what way?" I asked.

"That dark patch on the gravel where Mr. Gregory fell," Crampton said abruptly. "You remember the sort of stain that was left; at least, it looked like a stain."

Our eyes were automatically turned on the fatal spot. Yes, undoubtedly the stain was still there. And yet . . .

Perhaps Crampton read my thoughts, for he said: "I think Mr. Murchison has noticed it already. Walk right up to it, will you? That's right. Well, now . . . ?"

"Standing right over it," Framling said slowly, "the gravel here is as white as the rest. Has it been regravelled, Crampton? Is that what you mean?"

Crampton said: "No, nothing has been done. Professor Branden came one day and took a sample of the gravel, but otherwise it has not been disturbed. You see, then! There's no stain. Not what you'd call a stain."

Framling and I walked slowly backward for, perhaps, some ten or fifteen yards. As the distance grew, so there seemed to grow, also, a darkening of

the ground where we had been. It is rather difficult to explain. It was as if a shadow had suddenly been cast . . .

It was only when I looked more closely—following a quick glance at Crampton's rather pasty-pale face—that I saw the exact significance of the illusion. If it was an illusion. Framling saw it at the same time, and I saw his lips compress nervously.

The shadow—or stain, if you will—was the exact semblance of a sprawling body. It was almost as if Gregory himself lay there before our eyes. I don't know . . . As if the husk and flesh of the man had been destroyed, but the ego that was its complementary remained.

It was neither a shadow nor a stain, yet somehow it was both. It was there and it was not there. It was something, I think, that one saw with the eye of the mind rather than the physical eye.

The whole thing gave me a sense of horror. It was so uncanny—there in bright sunlight, with people treading, as it were, upon Gregory's apparition—that I felt my hair rise.

FRAMLING said: "Good Lord! But there's nothing there, Crampton. Nothing, really. That is even more insane than the other thing."

"How did you first come to discover it?" I asked.

Crampton smiled strangely.

"It's like one of these picture puzzles, isn't it? You know the kind I mean. Find a face hidden in a tree. Once it hits your eye you never lose it."

He shrugged his shoulders and continued: "An elderly pair came up to me just about dusk, Monday evening, and said there was a man lying on the path by the rockery here. Naturally I hurried along, thinking someone was ill. And I saw—this.

"The old couple saw it too: as it is, I mean. You never saw faces more scared. They went off in a hurry, muttering something about the path being haunted. Since then two others have come to me with the same story about a man stretched on the gravel. Mr. Murchison, it's—it's devilish."

What the explanation may be I do not know. It appears to me that perhaps that of Professor Branden—given in the light of our later discoveries—most closely approximates to truth. Branden's theory was that the liquid used in Gregory's body annihilation held some peculiar photogenic property.

In other words, he held that Gregory's body had been photographed, as it might be, on the elastic solid which theorists call the ether.

This was, I believe, the sole hint he ever obtained toward his unhappy after-attempts to discover the components of the amber fluid. Branden's death in the Swiss Alps was due to suicide, following depression. He set himself a difficult and dangerous task—dangerous because success would have been even more disastrous than failure, as will be evident later—and became insane in the doing.

The basis of his research, I believe, was the theory that this photogenic property of the amber fluid was due to the presence of a chemical allied to nitrate of silver. The reference here will be obvious to any dabbler in the photographic art.

Wherever the truth lay, Branden's own son became forfeit to this obsession.

We were still discussing this dreadful shadow mockery of poor Gregory when Hermann accidentally found us. His bewilderment was added to our own. Manifestly, the whole sum of

human experience was helpless to achieve understanding here.

Hermann said presently: "This saves me some ringing on the phone. I've just come from the premier. He received at his house, this morning, another letter from Toad. You had better read it for yourselves."

I looked over Framling's shoulder. The letter was, as I expected, brief and to the point.

Mr. Hannaford, I can no longer tolerate delay. Since the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. I shall call upon you at your office at eight o'clock on Monday night next, when I shall present incontestable evidence of my right to demand from the world whatever it pleases me. Victoria's share of the price of immunity now stands at one million pounds sterling.

Toad

Hermann commented: "As mad as a hatter, of course. But a fool, for all that."

His eyes were shining.

I said: "Why a fool?"

"Because he gives himself into our hands," the detective said jubilantly. "Do you think that we will ever let him go, once we have him? I should hope not. If he really intends to call at the Treasury, he is lost."

"What does the premier say?" Framling asked.

"He thinks as I do, that Toad is merely bluffing, in a kind of insane malice. And that reminds me, George. The premier, at all events, cannot be present on Monday evening. He's a pretty sick man and has strict orders from his doctor that he is to rest quietly at home for some days yet. He wishes Sir Hector Corrilees to preside in his place. If Toad turns up . . . But he won't. You'll see."

"I can't believe he would overlook

the threat of arrest," I felt impelled to say. "Very likely he feels secure enough to defy anything of the kind. It's my belief that he will keep this appointment."

"If he does," Hermann said stubbornly, "he's a goner. Make no mistake about that, Murchison. Why, man, what is there to prevent my arresting him? He's only human, as we are."

I said nothing, but somehow I wasn't impressed. It was incredible that Toad would not foresee and safeguard himself. A man clever enough to compound so diabolical a thing as the amber fluid was not to be caught napping that way. And so, indeed, it proved.

But I anticipate . . .

In spite of Toad's active reappearance I enjoyed our evening at the Framlings. Framling, too, seemed quite at ease. The fact was that indecision no longer irked us. We were once again confronted with something definite and tangible.

There was also the intriguing probability that we were shortly to meet Toad face to face. The myth would vanish and the man remain. As Hermann had said, Toad was only human, like ourselves.

And yet, with even the shadow of poor Gregory's body to bring its mocking reminder, how could we for a moment have called Toad human? Nothing more inhuman ever soiled this earth. I said so to myself that night as I lay in bed, and the sweat of a new terror damped my hair.

CHAPTER X

SATANOIL!

FOLLOWING a night of bad dreams I rose early on Sunday morning and went for a brisk walk in and around the Fitzroy Gardens. The weather was

doing one of those climatic about faces so typical of Melbourne and the dawn was cheerless and chill. From the trees birds sounded the dirge of a wormless melancholy.

As I walked, the city emerged slowly from the shadows in a stark nudity of chimney-potted skyline, wiping the smoke and train oil from her face with a rag of cold wind, and reaching for the powder and lipstick of urban respectability.

I was experiencing a great uneasiness. Some alarming thoughts had come to me in the night, and I sought now to view them squarely.

Not all my loyalty to Nancy could dispel my new and astounding fear that her father was, in some mysterious way, associated with Toad. Indeed, I had actually—during one of the night's dark depressions—contemplated a theory that Rufus Carlisle was himself Toad.

In the horrifying second during which I had struggled to cast this thought from me, I seemed to know that his mental disorder was merely the cloak of a consummate cunning, and that beneath it crouched the wild beast of an incomparable wickedness.

In the comforting light-of day I was able to realize how outrageous a theory this was. I was thoroughly ashamed of the mental panic which had led me into so clumsy a moral trap. I escaped it almost on sight, as it were; but the shock stimulated a suspicion of which I had long been conscious.

Now I brought it ruthlessly into the open. Was it possible, I thought, that Mertz was Toad, or was a creature of Toad's? Was Rufus Carlisle's unbalance being made use of to his own and our undoing?

In the light of this new thought many of the old man's actions now

appeared sinisterly suggestive. Whence came his sudden urge to proclaim with such fierce insistence the impending destruction of mankind? And to what insane lengths might not such apocalyptic fanaticism be driven, under the spur of evil influence?

I was to find answer to this—in part, at least—before that Sabbath day was closed. In the meantime, I could only catch miserably at the comfort of improbability.

Not for worlds would I have spoken my uneasiness aloud. But I vowed secretly to study the old man under the microscope of my suspicions. I decided that at the earliest opportunity I would endeavor to discover where he had gone with Mertz the night before. I would pick up the trail where Nancy had left it, and see where it led me.

Framling and I—better still, Crampton and I might spend a day in the vicinity of the Carlton Lane from which Nancy had fled so precipitately.

Useless to torture myself with remorse over the result of that decision. I have comforted myself with the reflection that my choice of Crampton, which was eventually to bring him to an inconceivably dreadful end, was something beyond my control. Crampton or another . . .

But of this black shadow of approaching evil I was then happily in ignorance.

THE morning and afternoon passed quietly. Toward evening Rufus Carlisle left the house. Only for the fact that I had promised Nancy to attend with her the evening service at St. Paul's Cathedral, I think I would have followed him there and then. But it was the first Sunday since we had become engaged; Nancy wanted to go to the service, and I was quite willing.

We entered the cathedral by the southwest porch. Already a large congregation was assembled; and the high, solemn spaces were exquisitely astir to the organ voluntary—it was, I remember, Handel's *Largo*. Nancy, her mother's prayer book held tightly against her breast, led me to a central seat close to the pulpit. Her eyes were softly shining as she smiled at me.

Presently the service began. It was so long since I had attended church that I was glad of Nancy's guiding book. But the hymns I knew, and if my voice was rusty from disuse, at least I sang heartily and happily. Prayers and lessons, and then the offertory. The congregation settled itself for the sermon.

The Archbishop had mounted to the pulpit, and there came that little hush which marks the preacher's gathering of his thought to purposeful speech. I was looking idly at the white-gowned choristers in the choir seats . . .

And suddenly came interruption. In to the cathedral quiet came a man's voice—high, penetrating, cutting the silence as if with a sword—a fierce, exultant voice that seemed to fall from the vault of heaven itself.

"Behold, the end of all things is at hand. The world being overflowed with water perished, but now is reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of unrighteous men . . ."

The congregation sat as if paralyzed. I saw the Archbishop turn in amazement, and a verger hurriedly left his seat in the aisle. Nancy's hand gripped my arm so strongly that I winced. Her face had gone deathly white.

And all the while the hidden voice spoke its eerie threat: "For fire shall turn to water, and water to fire; and they two shall be one; and there shall be a new Heaven and a new earth . . ."

The worshipers were rousing now

from their stupor of outraged surprise. A man at my elbow, whose curiosity evidently outweighed his sense of church ethics, was almost on his feet, in an effort to discover where the unorthodox preacher was stationed.

A second man, youthful and alert, whom I immediately took to be a newspaper reporter, was tiptoeing down the west aisle toward the chancel, brazenly clutching a wad of copy paper.

The precentor and a second verger were standing by the choir gate. I saw the first point suddenly upward toward the gallery that runs high above the altar.

" . . . and the elements shall melt with fervent heat . . ."

I heard a sob catch in Nancy's throat. I sensed rather than heard the terrified whisper from her trembling lips.

"Maurice. Oh, Maurice. It's—Daddy."

She half rose, but I managed to restrain her.

"Sit down, dearest," I said. "We can do no good. Steady. If we attract attention it may lead to his hurt. They can't know who he is, and he might get away."

Old Rufus had, in fact, ceased his fulminations. The Archbishop, with admirable nerve, was announcing his text. I recall that it had some bearing upon the prevailing unemployment. He looked calmly down over his congregation, as if to say: "I beg of you to disregard this impious interruption. Some madman, no doubt, my friends. They have gone to secure him. Give me your attention, and I shall quickly restore your composure."

Regardless of being seen I put my arm about Nancy's shaking body. Her eyes were closed, and I think she was on the point of fainting. My mind was

in a ferment, through which the impassive tones of the preacher came at brief, uncertain intervals. . . .

I roused Nancy gently.

"We can slip away now, without drawing attention."

I HAD to support her down the aisle to the door. Poor girl, the iron of her father's unbalance had bitten deep that night into the tender courage of her spirit. She looked ghastly.

A verger met us concernedly in the porch. He murmured something about fetching a glass of water. Nancy shook her head feebly.

I said: "Thanks, no. If she might rest here a moment, while I get a taxi . . ."

He came with me to the outside steps. He said: "That affair was enough to upset any lady. I don't wonder she looks ill. You know, women are queerly superstitious. As if there could ever really come an end to the world, all in a minute."

"You don't think it possible? And yet the Scriptures foretell it, don't they? At least, I always thought so."

"Mere allegory," he said, with a smile. "We're more practical nowadays than to credit such a useless catastrophe."

I was prompted to say: "I've no doubt they thought themselves practical enough in the days of Noah."

When I reëntered the porch Nancy smiled at me bravely. The verger was still there, and I could no longer forbear the question that was tormenting both Nancy and myself.

I said: "Did they catch the poor fellow, do you know?"

It seemed an age before the answer came.

"Unfortunately he got away. He must have slipped through into the dio-

cesan buildings. At any rate, he hasn't been found yet. The mystery is how he ever got into the gallery at all. We've been troubled before with cranks of the kind, but never before so sensationally."

We were silent during the short drive home to Monray Street. Cuthbert and Mollie Hollidew were in the sitting room, but there was no sign of Rufus Carlisle.

Miss Hollidew exclaimed at sight of Nancy: "My goodness, what have you been doing to the child, Mr. Murchison?"

I said: "Nancy isn't feeling very well."

"My goodness!" reiterated Miss Hollidew. "She looks like a corpse. I've some brandy in my room."

The good-hearted creature almost carried Nancy upstairs, and a little later we could hear her bustling about in the kitchen and crying out to know what had become of the hot-water bag. On the way back to Nancy she put her head in at the door.

"I want her to go to bed, but d'you think she will? She's worried ill over that old fool of a father of hers. He ought to be put in the asylum."

She vanished again precipitately, leaving Cuthbert and me to stare at each other.

I said: "What a warm heart Miss Hollidew has, Mr. Weinseidle."

Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

He pulled his little bit of a mustache and nodded at me almost humanly. My praise of Miss Hollidew had evidently touched him.

I WAS searching for something to say, when we heard the front door open. A moment later Rufus Carlisle stumbled in and fell to his knees by the piano stool.

The man was a scarecrow. His clothes were torn and dirty, and he shook like a leaf. His eyes were two live coals set in a china-white face. He began to mumble inarticulately, beating his thin hands together.

The spectacle was too much for Cuthbert's reserve. He said: "Old boy's been on a jag. Might have fallen off a street car by the look of him. Absolutely!"

"Mr. Weinseidle, I know you like Nancy," I said. "Will you promise me something for her sake?"

He said: "Undoubtedly."

I said: "If you hear or read of anything unusual which took place in St. Paul's Cathedral this evening, please say nothing to anyone about this poor old man here. I don't want to speak any plainer. I'm sure you will understand."

Cuthbert nodded.

"And if you can give Miss Hollidew the hint, I'll be doubly grateful," I said. "It's a strangely sad world, Mr. Weinseidle. If we don't help each other now and then, we're lost to happiness. You'll keep your own counsel, won't you?"

He did a thing that endeared his eccentricity to me for always. He stood up and very shyly offered his hand.

"Sure, Mr. Murchison . . . fond of Nancy, y' know . . . glad to help."

I said: "I wonder if we could persuade Mr. Carlisle to go to bed, without troubling Nancy."

To my surprise, Cuthbert winked. He put his face down to the old man's and said: "Satanoil."

The effect upon Rufus Carlisle was amazing. He looked at Cuthbert with an expression of terror such as I hope never again to see on the face of any living creature. He put out a shaking hand, as if to ward off a blow.

Cuthbert said: "Hadn't you better go to bed, Mr. Carlisle? Listen: Satanoil."

"In Heaven's name," Rufus Carlisle mumbled, "who are you? You're not—you're not—I'll go, I'll go. You wouldn't do that. No, no! Not that name . . ."

I believe I am not wrong in stating that he ran from the room. We heard him clawing his way up the stairs and then the thud of his bedroom door closing. The whole thing was so astonishing that for the moment I was speechless. Even Cuthbert seemed shaken by the result of his effort.

I said presently: "How on earth did you do that? What was that you said to him, Mr. Weinseidle?"

Cuthbert feebly produced and lit a cigarette.

He answered: "I said, Satanoil."

"Satanoil! What does that mean?"

"I'm hanged if I know, Mr. Murchison. Honest I don't. There was a chap here before you came, fellow named Mertz; only saw him once or twice, and didn't like him. Queer bird. I heard him say that to the old boy one time, and the old chap nearly took a fit. Just thought I'd try it on him now."

This effort left him breathless.

I could think of nothing to say for the moment, but: "Did Mertz know that you overheard?"

"I don't think so. Didn't see me. Only passing, y'know."

I believe that one of the most remarkable events of this period was the blossoming of Cuthbert's speech. For this Toad was indirectly responsible. Whatever Cuthbert may afterward have suspected, I am sure it was far wide of the truth. Unless he lives to read this record—which I very much doubt, in view of the fact, principally, that he has never been known to read

anything at all—he will never know that he owes the development of his powers of conversation to the excitement produced in us all by this threat of Toad.

I repeated the name aloud several times, trying to find a clue to the meaning.

"Satanoil. Satanoil."

The significance stared me in the face, and yet I could not grasp it. Afterward, of course, the thing exploded its own hellish interpretation. But for the moment I could make nothing of it.

At this moment, Mollie Hollidew rejoined us. She said: "Did you ever see the like of old Rufus Carlisle? Cuthbert, I simply must have a cigarette. The old boy looks as if he's been hit by a cyclone, and he's rattier than ever. Nancy's seeing him into bed.

"I was to tell you, Mr. Murchison, that she's feeling well again, and will be down in the kitchen in a minute or two. My goodness, tomorrow's Monday, and we're rehearsing a new ballet. I think it's disgraceful the way they work ladies these days . . ."

WHILE I waited in the kitchen I lit the gas stove, just for the comfort of seeing the flames. Nancy came in very quietly and shut the door. She came straight to me and put her head on my shoulder. She cried a little.

I tried to comfort her. I said: "Well, he's come home safe and sound. We must be thankful for that. It isn't as bad as it seems, you know. They'll never find out who it was. I don't suppose they'll even try."

She said: "It isn't so much that part of it, Maurice. It's the general hopelessness and depression of everything. All sorts of queer, horrible things seem to be going on all around us. I feel

sometimes as if I were living in the middle of a nightmare, and that none of us really existed outside my dream. And I get frightened . . . Nothing will ever hurt you or take you away from me, will it?"

"Not if I have any say in the matter," I said. "Come, we mustn't get morbid. A good sleep and you'll feel ever so much better in the morning.

"Maurice," she said, "who is Mr. Mertz?"

I almost answered, "Toat." But, apart from my caution, I couldn't be sure that I'd have been right in saying so. I don't know even now if it was so. I think it was, but I don't know. Nor have I ever been able to identify the third of that Devil's trinity—Mona Framling's Chinese.

Were those three in reality one? I wish I knew. I should sleep sounder if I could believe that.

What I did say was: "Does it matter, dearest? I mean, I expect he's just an ordinary kind of mortal, a little eccentric, perhaps, who has a quaint liking for your father. It isn't fair of us to lay everything at Mertz's door, for we really can't be sure that his influence is evil."

"It is . . . it is," Nancy said passionately. "Maurice, a woman knows these things instinctively. I always felt that there was something horrible about Mr. Mertz. Always. There's an uncleanness, a wickedness . . ."

I said: "Never fear, it can't touch us. Look here, I promise to find out all about Mertz for you, within a day or two. That ought to be easy enough."

"Be careful," she said. I felt a little shudder go through her. "Maurice, be careful. In some way that I can't understand I know that he's dangerous. Promise that you will not go alone."

"I'll take Crampton with me." I

laughed. "We'll make a start at the spot where you last saw your Dad with Mertz: that lane in Carlton. Cramp-ton's big enough to eat half a dozen of your Mertzses. I promise we'll be careful."

This seemed to soothe her, and a little later I was able to persuade her to go to bed. I sat up until Cuthbert had gone, and then went in search of my own rest.

CHAPTER XI

TONIGHT I COME

WHEN I entered the Treasury next morning I knew a little stir of trepidation and excitement in my veins. I felt that the night would mark further extraordinary happenings. The paramount thought was: Will Toad reveal himself?

I still believed that he would. We were about to enter a new phase of this uniquely abominable experience. I felt it profoundly.

Almost as soon as I entered the building I encountered George Framling. He smiled at me rather strangely and held out a letter. It was addressed *Maurice Murchison, Esq., One of the Seven, Premier's Office, Melbourne.*

I was staring at this unusual superscription—for the moment without realizing its sinister satire—when Framling produced a second envelope, addressed to himself and similarly subtitled. It had, I saw, been opened.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Look and see."

I did so. There was nothing but a small oblong of white cardboard. On it was roughly drawn a toad with its thick squat body covered with warts or tubercles, and the pored protruberance behind each eye. Underneath the drawing this line was hand printed:

Bufo vulgaris. He spits poison.

Somehow I could not resist grinning. It had, no doubt, been intended to scare me: actually it had the opposite effect. The melodrama was overdone. That is the worst of your criminal—he cannot resist a theatrical strutting.

I suppose I must have looked a question, for Framling said: "Yes, as far as I know, we each got one: Hermann did, for he rang me up to tell me. You'll find that the premier, Branden, Sir Hector, and Crampton were similarly honored in this morning's mail. It's a crude threat."

"The point that occurs to me," I said, "is that it shows Toad has a complete knowledge of who we are and what we are. It is evident he wanted to let us know this on the eve of declaring himself. I don't quite like that part of it. He must be fully equipped to defy us."

"I can't see it," Framling said. "Hermann says it's sheer bluff. He says Toad can't possibly be such a fool as to put himself into our hands. It doesn't stand to reason."

I reminded him of the appalling death of Mr. Gregory.

"Does that stand to reason, George?"

He had to admit that it did not.

I said: "Toad is too evidently outside ordinary methods and manners. He tells us so, here on this card. He may have chosen a crude way of doing so—in fact, he admits it, for he boasts of himself as *bufo vulgaris*—but he means business, all the same. He can spit poison. He has proved it, and he is prepared to prove it again."

"Perhaps you're right, Maurice. If we knew what the poison consisted of, we could look for the antidote. The trouble is that we don't know. As Branden said, it's an outrage on probability."

I inquired how the premier was.

"Not at all well. There isn't a chance of having him with us tonight. He's as worried as the devil. I'm to report all that takes place at the earliest opportunity. Sir Hector Corrilees had a long talk with Mr. Hannaford yesterday, and I fancy they arrived at some decision. Sir Hector has full power to speak for the premier tonight."

FOR the remainder of the day the matter rested there. Routine vents claimed our attention. The sole interlude was provided by Professor Branden, who looked in briefly to ask whether Framling and I had received cards.

He said: "Well, Mr. Murchison, the chase grows stern."

"At any rate, we hope to sight the quarry soon," I replied.

He smiled a little sadly.

"I'm utterly depressed. I thought I knew something of chemical science, but it appears that I really know very little. I haven't a ghost of an idea what this darned amber fluid is. I feel like a child groping its way through the most ordinary lessons. I'm ashamed and humbled. I'm . . ."

I had an uncomfortable impression that he was on the point of breaking down completely. His face was haggard and his voice shook.

I interjected hastily: "You take altogether too severe a view of your own measure of responsibility, Professor. No man could do more than you have, seeing the complete fog in which you are forced to work. I don't see how you can expect to discover anything, having nothing at all to go on."

But he would not listen to this.

"It's my job, and I've failed. Sometimes I'm tempted to beg Mr. Hannaford to hand the task elsewhere. Johns

of Adelaide, or Paul Birkett, from the Bureau of Science and Industry. Both keen, clever men. They might succeed. The only thing that holds me is that poor Gregory was my friend. I want to avenge him myself. I tell you, Murchison, I will discover this devil's brew. I will—if it kills me."

Poor chap. Kill him it did; but not before it had clouded that fine, generous mind. *The toad spits poison.* How true that was to prove. Even in death the poison went on working its foul mission. But that was yet to come.

He calmed, presently, and went away.

And so the day passed.

Nancy and I had tea cosily together in the evening. Mollie Hollidew was dining with Cuthbert in the city, and old Rufus Carlisle had wandered away early in the afternoon. Nancy, I thought, seemed much happier about him.

She said: "He was so quiet and gentle this morning. It was lovely to see him. He kissed me of his own accord, and spoke of mother—a thing he hasn't done for years. Such a grave, solemn old chap, as if all the cares of the world were resting on his poor shoulders."

I hated leaving her alone in the house, but it could not be helped. I had told her that I had some special correspondence of the premier's to attend to, and that I should probably be late home. I made her promise that she would not leave the house on any pretext whatever.

She did so laughingly.

"Why, Maurice, how dreadfully serious you look. Are you afraid that Mona's wicked Chinese will beguile me out? But, of course, I can't go out. I have to wait in for father."

Not being able to tell her about *Toad*,

I had to pretend that my seriousness was unconscious.

I said: "It is having to leave you that gives me a dour look, I expect. Anyway, I always hated correspondence. Letter writing is an art of which I know nothing."

I FOUND Hermann strolling up and down in front of the Treasury main entrance. I knew from the enthusiastic grip of his handshake that he was feeling in fine fettle. Indeed, he presently unburdened himself with all the naïveté of a school girl attending her first party.

"If Toad comes tonight, Murchison, it's his finish. I'll have a plainclothes man hiding around every exit in the building. He can't escape, no matter how he tries. No one is to interfere with him if and when he enters. We'll be like the good old British bulldog,

Murchison. We don't object to his coming, but we do object to his going."

The detective was rubbing his hands together in a pleasurable sense of impending triumph. I thought the optimism ill-judged, but refrained from saying so.

He knew my opinion and was not all impressed by it. It would have been idle to labor my point. And after all, I didn't want to be thought presumptuous. His was the wider experience.

Sir Hector Corrieles, Professor Branden, and Framling, I now learned, were already waiting in the premier's room. On the arrival shortly of Cramp-ton, we three joined the others. I looked at the clock on the mantel, as I took my seat at Framling's side. It pointed ten minutes to eight o'clock.

Ten minutes until we saw him face to face—the Toad that spat poison. We sat stiffly, and our faces grew tense. . . .

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

TILL DOOMSDAY

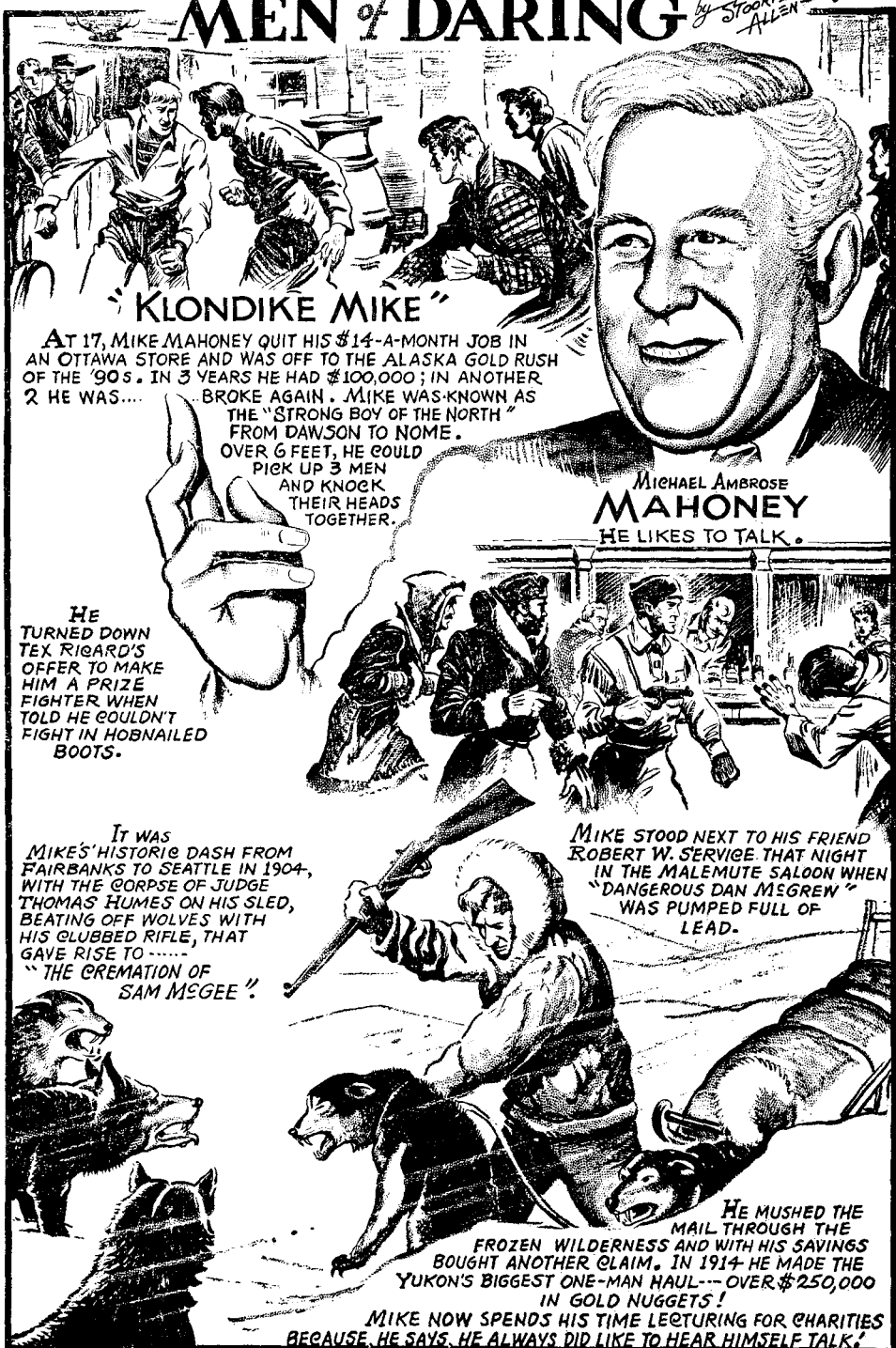
How many landsmen know that ghost of the waves, the Flying Dutchman? A kindly ghost, they say; but on a stormy night off Cape Town it seemed otherwise. An eerie short novelet of a phantom's gratitude, by

RICHARD SALE

THE AWAKENING OF MR. A.	 MR. A.: Whew! I hate the very thought of having to take a cathartic. MR. B.: You wouldn't if you'd only try Ex-Lax. It tastes swell—just like chocolate.	 MR. A.: Why, that's what we give to the youngsters. What I need is dynamite! MR. B.: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax is plenty effective, but it won't upset you.
LATER  MR. A.: Boy, I feel like a million this morning! That Ex-Lax sure is great stuff! MR. B.: You said it, pal! We've been using Ex-Lax in our family for 30 years!	The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet <i>gentle</i>! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax the next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family. 10¢ and 25¢ 	

MEN OF DARING

by STOOKY ALLEN



"KLONDIKE MIKE"

AT 17, MIKE MAHONEY QUIT HIS \$14-A-MONTH JOB IN AN OTTAWA STORE AND WAS OFF TO THE ALASKA GOLD RUSH OF THE '90'S. IN 3 YEARS HE HAD \$100,000; IN ANOTHER 2 HE WAS....

BROKE AGAIN. MIKE WAS KNOWN AS THE "STRONG BOY OF THE NORTH" FROM DAWSON TO NOME. OVER 6 FEET, HE COULD PICK UP 3 MEN AND KNOCK THEIR HEADS TOGETHER.

HE TURNED DOWN TEX RICARD'S OFFER TO MAKE HIM A PRIZE FIGHTER WHEN TOLD HE COULDN'T FIGHT IN HOBNAILED BOOTS.

IT WAS MIKE'S HISTORIC DASH FROM FAIRBANKS TO SEATTLE IN 1904, WITH THE CORPSE OF JUDGE THOMAS HUMES ON HIS SLED, BEATING OFF WOLVES WITH HIS CLUBBED RIFLE, THAT GAVE RISE TO.....
"THE CREMATION OF SAM MCGEE".

MIKE STOOD NEXT TO HIS FRIEND ROBERT W. SERVICE THAT NIGHT IN THE MALEMUTE SALOON WHEN "DANGEROUS DAN MCGREW" WAS PUMPED FULL OF LEAD.

HE MUSHED THE MAIL THROUGH THE FROZEN WILDERNESS AND WITH HIS SAVINGS BOUGHT ANOTHER CLAIM. IN 1914 HE MADE THE YUKON'S BIGGEST ONE-MAN HAUL---OVER \$250,000 IN GOLD NUGGETS!

MIKE NOW SPENDS HIS TIME LECTURING FOR CHARITIES BECAUSE, HE SAYS, HE ALWAYS DID LIKE TO HEAR HIMSELF TALK.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

All at Once, No Alice

By CORNELL WOOLRICH

Author of "Señor Flatfoot," "The Eye of Doom," etc.

He stepped out of the warm sunlight into a dark, empty room; he groped in terror, and his hands met only the constricting black void. And no one would believe what he said—about the little girl who wasn't there

CHAPTER I

THE NARROW ROOM

IT WAS over so quickly I almost thought something had been left out, but I guess he'd been doing it long enough to know his business. The only way I could tell for sure it was over, was when I heard him say: "You may kiss the bride." But then, I'd never gone through it before.

We turned and pecked at each other, a little bashful because they were watching us.

He and the motherly-looking woman who had been a witness—I guess she was his housekeeper—stood there smiling benevolently, and also a little tiredly. The clock said one fifteen. Then he shook hands with the two of us and said, "Good luck to both of you," and she shook with us too and said, "I wish you a lot of happiness."

We shifted from the living room where it had taken place, out into the front hall, a little awkwardly. Then he held the screen door open and we moved from there out onto the porch.

On the porch step Alice nudged me and whispered, "You forgot something."

I didn't even know how much I was supposed to give him. I took out two singles and held them in one hand, then I took out a five and held that in the

other. Then I went back toward him all flustered and said, "I—I guess you thought I was going to leave without remembering this."

I reached my hand down to his and brought it back empty. He kept right on smiling, as if this happened nearly every time too, the bridegroom forgetting like that. It was only after I turned away and rejoined her that I glanced down at my other hand and saw which it was I'd given him. It was the five. That was all right; five thousand of them couldn't have paid him for what he'd done for me, the way I felt about it.

We went down their front walk and got into the car. The lighted doorway outlined them both for a minute. They raised their arms and said, "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, and much obliged," I called back. "Wait'll they go in," I said in an undertone to Alice, without starting the engine right away.

As soon as the doorway had blacked out, we turned and melted together on the front seat, and this time we made it a real kiss. "Any regrets?" I whispered to her very softly.

"It must have been awful before I was married to you," she whispered back. "How did I ever stand it so long?"

I don't think we said a word all the way in to Michianopolis.

**Complete
Short
Novel**



Ainslie was out cold. The secretary dropped on my curved back like a dead weight and I went down flat, my face to the floor

We were both too happy. Just the wind and the stars and us. And a couple of cigarettes.

We got to the outskirts around two thirty, and by three were all the way in downtown. We shopped around for a block or two. "This looks like a nice hotel," I said finally. I parked outside and we went in.

I THINK the first hotel was called the Commander. I noticed that the bellhops let us strictly alone; didn't bustle out to bring in our bags or anything.

I said to the desk man, "We'd like one of your best rooms and bath."

He gave me a sort of rueful smile, as if to say, "You should know better than that." . . . "I only wish I had something to give you," was the way he put it.

"All filled up?" I turned to her and murmured, "Well, we'll have to try some place else."

He overheard me. "Excuse me, but did you come in without making reservations ahead?"

"Yes, we just drove in now. Why?"

He shook his head compassionately at my ignorance. "I'm afraid you're going to have a hard time finding a room in any of the hotels tonight."

"Why? They can't all be filled up."

"There's a three-day convention of the Knights of Balboa being held here. All the others started sending their overflow to us as far back as Monday evening, and our own last vacancy went yesterday noon."

The second one was called the Stuyvesant, I think. "There must be something, in a city this size," I said when we came out of there. "We'll keep looking until we find it."

I didn't bother noticing the names of the third and fourth. We couldn't turn around and go all the way back to our original point of departure—it would have been mid-morning before we reached it—and there was nothing that offered suitable accommodations between; just filling stations, roadside lunchrooms and detached farmsteads.

Besides she was beginning to tire. She refused to admit it, but it was easy to tell. It worried me.

THE fifth place was called the Royal. It was already slightly less first-class than the previous ones had been; we were running out of them now. Nothing wrong with it, but just a little seedier and older.

I got the same answer at the desk, but this time I wouldn't take it. The way her face drooped when she heard it was enough to make me persist. I took the night clerk aside out of her hearing.

"Listen, you've got to do something for me, I don't care what it is," I whispered fiercely. "We've just driven all the way from Lake City and my wife's all in. I'm not going to drag her around to another place tonight"

Then as his face continued impassive, "If you can't accommodate both of us, find some way of putting her up at least. I'm willing to take my own chances, go out and sleep in the car or

walk around the streets for the night."

"Wait a minute," he said, hooking his chin, "I think I could work out something like that for you. I just thought of something. There's a little bit of a dinky room on the top floor. Ordinarily it's not used as a guest room at all, just as a sort of store-room. You couldn't possibly both use it, because there's only a single-width cot in it; but if you don't think your wife would object, I'd be glad to let her have it, and I think you might still be able to find a room for yourself at the Y. They don't admit women, and most of these Knights have brought their wives with them."

I took a look at her pretty, drawn face. "Anything, anything," I said gratefully.

He still had his doubts. "You'd better take her up and let her see it first."

A colored boy came with us, with a passkey. On the way up I explained it to her. She gave me a rueful look, but I could see she was too tired even to object as much as she felt she should have. "Ah, that's mean," she murmured, "Our first night by ourselves."

"It's just for tonight. We'll drive on right after breakfast. It's important that you get some rest, hon. You can't fool me, you can hardly keep your eyes open any more."

She tucked her hand consolingly under my arm. "I don't mind if you don't. It'll give me something to look forward to, seeing you in the morning."

The bellboy led us along a quiet, green-carpeted hall, and around a turn, scanning numbers on the doors. He stopped three down from the turn, on the right-hand side, put his key in. "This is it here, sir." The number was 1006.

The man at the desk hadn't exaggerated. The room itself was little better than an alcove, long and narrow. I suppose two could have gotten into it; but it would have been a physical impossibility for two to sleep in it the way it was fitted up. It had a cot that was little wider than a shelf.

To give you an idea how narrow the room was, the window was narrower than average, and yet not more than a foot of wall-strip showed on either side of its frame. In other words it took up nearly the width of one entire side of the room.

I suppose I could have sat up in the single armchair all night and slept, or tried to, that way; but as long as there was a chance of getting a horizontal bed at the Y, why not be sensible about it? She agreed with me in this.

"Think you can go this, just until the morning?" I asked her, and the longing way she was eyeing that miserable cot gave me the answer. She was so tired, anything would have looked good to her right then.

We went down again and I told him I'd take it. I had the bellboy take her bag out of the car and bring it in, and the desk clerk turned the register around for her to sign.

She poised the inked pen and flashed me a tender look just as she was about to sign. "First time I've used it," she breathed. I looked over her shoulder and watched her trace *Mrs. James Cannon* along the lined space. The last entry above hers was *A. Krumbake, and wife*. I noticed it because it was such a funny name.

THE desk clerk had evidently decided by now that we were fairly desirable people. "I'm terribly sorry I couldn't do more for you," he said.

"It's just for this one night. By tomorrow morning, already, a lot of them'll be leaving."

I went up with her a second time, to see that she was made as comfortable as she could be under the circumstances. But then there was nothing definitely wrong with the room except its tininess, and the only real hardship was our temporary separation.

I tipped the boy for bringing up her bag, and then I tipped him a second time for going and digging up a nice, fluffy quilt for her at my request—not to spread over her but to spread on top of the mattress and soften it up a little. Those cots aren't as comfortable as regular beds by a darned sight. But she was so tired I was hoping she wouldn't notice the difference.

Then after he'd thanked me for the double-header he'd gotten out of it, and left the room, I helped her off with her coat and hung it up for her, and even got down on my heels and undid the straps of her little sandals, so she wouldn't have to bend over and go after them herself. Then we kissed a couple of times and told each other all about it, and I backed out the door.

The last I saw of her that night she was sitting on the edge of that cot in there, her shoeless feet raised to it and partly tucked under her, like a little girl. She raised one hand, wriggled the fingers at me in goodnight as I reluctantly eased the door closed.

"Until tomorrow, sweetheart," she called gently, when there was a crack of opening left.

"Until tomorrow."

The night was as still around us as if it were holding its breath. The latch went *cluck*, and there we were on opposite sides of it.

The bellboy had taken the car down

with him just now after he'd checked her in, and I had to wait out there a minute or two for him to bring it back up again at my ring. I stepped back to the turn in the hall while waiting, to look at the frosted glass transom over her door; and short as the time was, her light was already out. She must have just shrugged off her dress, fallen back flat, and pulled the coverings up over her.

Poor kid, I thought, with a commiserating shake of my head. The glass elevator panel flooded with light and I got in the car. The one bellhop doubled for liftman after twelve.

"I guess she'll be comfortable," he said.

"She was asleep already before I left the floor," I told him.

The desk man told me where the nearest branch of the Y was, and I took the car with me as the quickest way of getting over there at that hour. I had no trouble at all getting a room, and not a bad one at that for six bits.

I didn't phone her before going up, to tell her I'd gotten something for myself, because I knew by the way I'd seen that light go out she was fast asleep already, and it would have been unnecessarily cruel to wake her again.

I WOKE up eight, and again I didn't phone her, to find out how she was, because in the first place I was going right over there myself in a few more minutes, and in the second place I wanted her to get all the sleep she could before I got there.

I even took my time, showered and shaved up good, and drove over slowly, to make sure of not getting there any earlier than nine.

It was a beautiful day, with the sun as brand-new-looking as if it had never shone before, was just being broken in;

and I even stopped off and bought a gardenia for her to wear on the shoulder of her dress. I thought: I'll check her out of that depressing dump. We'll drive to the swellest restaurant in town, and she'll sit having orange juice and toast while I sit looking at her face.

I braked in front of the Royal, got out, and went in, lighting up the whole lobby the way I was beaming.

A different man was at the desk now, on the day shift, but I knew the number of her room so I rode right up without stopping. I got out at the tenth, went down the hall the way he'd led us last night—still green-carpeted but a little less quiet now—and around the turn.

When I came to the third door down, on the right-hand side—the door that had 1006 on it—I stopped and listened a minute to see if I could tell whether she was up yet or not. If she wasn't up yet, I was going back downstairs again, hang around in the lobby, and give her another half hour of badly-needed sleep.

But she was up already. I could hear a sound in there as if she were brushing out her dress or coat with a stiff-bristled brush—*skish, skish, skish*—so I knocked, easy and loving, on the door with just three knuckles.

The *skish-skish-skish* broke off a minute, but then went right on again. But the door hadn't been tightly closed into the frame at all, and my knocking sent it drifting inward an inch or two. A whiff of turpentine or something like that nearly threw me over, but without stopping to distinguish what it was or wonder what it was coming from there, I pushed the door the rest of the way in and walked in.

Then I pulled up short. I saw I had the wrong room.

There wasn't anything in it—no

furniture, that is. Just bare floorboards, walls and ceiling. Even the light fixture had been taken down, and two black wires stuck out of a hole, like insect feelers, where it had been.

A man in spotted white overalls and peaked cap was standing on a step-ladder slapping a paint brush up and down the walls. *Skish-skish-slop!*

I grunted, "Guess I've got the wrong number," and backed out.

"Guess you must have, bud," he agreed, equally laconic, without even turning his head to see who I was.

I looked up at the door from the outside. Number 1006. But that was the number they'd given her, sure it was. I looked in a second time. Long and narrow, like an alcove. Not more than a foot of wall space on either side of the window frame.

Sure, this was the room, all right. They must have found out they had something better available after all, and changed her after I left last night. I said, "Where'd they put the lady that was in here, you got any idea?"

Skish-skish-skish. "I dunno, bud, you'll have to find out at the desk. It was empty when I come here to work at seven." *Skish-skish-slop!*

I went downstairs to the desk again, and I said, "Excuse me. What room have you got Mrs. Cannon in now?"

He looked up some chart or other they use, behind the scenes, then he came back and said, "We have no Mrs. Cannon here."

CHAPTER II

ALICE WHERE ART THOU?

I PULLED my face back. Then I thrust it forward again. "What's the matter with you?" I said curtly. "I came here with her myself last night. Better take another look."

He did. A longer one. Then he came back and said, "I'm sorry, there's no Mrs. Cannon registered here."

I knew there was nothing to get excited about; it would probably be straightened out in a minute or two; but it was a pain in the neck. I was very patient. After all, this was the first morning of my honeymoon. "Your night man was on duty at the time. It was about three-thirty this morning. He gave her 1006."

He looked that up too. "That's not in use," he said. "That's down for re-decorating. It's been empty for the past—"

"I don't care what it is. I tell you they checked my wife in there at three this morning. I went up with her myself! Will you quit arguing and find out what room she's in, for me? I don't want to stand here talking to you all day; I want to be with her."

"But I'm telling you, mister, the occupancy chart shows no one by that name."

"Then look in the register if you don't believe me. I watched her sign it myself."

People were standing around the lobby looking at me now, but I didn't care.

"It would be on the chart," he insisted. "It would have been transferred—" He ran the pad of his finger up the register page from bottom to top. Too fast, I couldn't help noticing: without a hitch, as if there were nothing to impede it. Then he went back a page and ran it up that, in the same streamlined way.

"Give it to me," I said impatiently. "I'll find it for you in a minute." I flung it around my way.

A. Krumbake, and wife, stared at me. And then under that just a blank space all the way down to the bottom of the page. No more check-ins.

I could feel the pores of my face sort of closing up. That was what it felt like, anyway. Maybe it was just the process of getting pale. "She signed right under that name. It's been rubbed out."

"Oh no it hasn't," he told me firmly. "No one tampers with the register like that. People may leave, but their names stay on it."

Dazedly, I traced the ball of my finger back and forth across the white paper under that name *Krumbake*. Smooth and unrubbed, its semi-glossy finish unimpaired by erasure. I held the page up toward the light and tried to squint through it, to see whether it showed thinner there, either from rubbing or some other means of eradication. It was all of the same even opacity.

I SPOKE in a lower voice now; I wasn't being impatient any more. "There's something wrong. Something wrong about this. I can't understand it. I saw her write it. I saw her sign it with my own eyes. I've known it was the right hotel all along, but even if I wasn't sure, this other name, this name above, would prove it to me. *Krumbake*. I remember it from last night. Maybe they changed her without notifying you down here."

"That wouldn't be possible; it's through me, down here, that all changes are made. It isn't that I don't know what room she's in; it's that there's absolutely no record of any such person ever having been at the hotel, so you see you must be mis—"

"Call the manager for me," I said hoarsely.

I stood there waiting by the onyx-topped desk until he came. I stood there very straight, very impassive, not touching the edge of the counter with

my hands in any way, about an inch clear of it.

People were bustling back and forth, casually, normally, cheerily, behind me; plinking their keys down on the onyx; saying, "Any mail for me?"; saying, "I'll be in the coffee shop if I'm called." And something was already trying to make me feel a little cut off from them, a little set apart. As if a shadowy finger had drawn a ring around me where I stood, and mystic vapors were already beginning to rise from it, walling me off from my fellowmen.

I wouldn't let the feeling take hold of me—yet—but it was already there, trying to. I'd give an imperceptible shake of my head every once in a while and say to myself, "Things like this don't happen, in broad daylight. It's just some kind of misunderstanding; it'll be cleared up presently."

The entrance, the lobby, had seemed so bright when I first came in, but I'd been mistaken. There were shadows lengthening in the far corners that only I could see. The gardenia I had for her was wilting.

The manager was no help at all. He tried to be, listened attentively, but then the most he could do was have the clerk repeat what he'd already done for me, look on the chart and look in the register. After all, details like that were in the hands of the staff. I simply got the same thing as before, only relayed through him now instead of direct from the desk man. "No, there hasn't been any Mrs. Cannon here at any time."

"Your night man will tell you," I finally said in despair, "he'll tell you I brought her here. Get hold of him, ask him. He'll remember us."

"I'll call him down; he rooms right here in the house," he said. But then with his hand on the phone he stopped

to ask again, "Are you quite sure it was this hotel, Mr. Cannon? He was on duty until six this morning, and I hate to wake him up unless you—"

"Bring him down," I said. "This is more important to me than his sleep. It's got to be cleared up." I wasn't frightened yet, out-and-out scared; just baffled, highly worried, and with a peculiar lost feeling.

He came down inside of five minutes. I knew him right away, the minute he stepped out of the car, in spite of the fact that other passengers had come down with him. I was so sure he'd be able to straighten it out that I took a step toward him without waiting for him to join us. If they noticed that, which was a point in favor of my credibility—my knowing him at sight like that—they gave no sign.

I said, "You remember me, don't you? You remember checking my wife into 1006 at three this morning, and telling me I'd have to go elsewhere."

"No," he said with polite regret. "I'm afraid I don't recall having seen you before."

I could feel my face go white as if a soundless bombshell of flour or talcum had just burst all over it. I put one foot behind me and set the heel down and stayed that way.

The manager asked him, "Well, did the gentleman stop at the desk perhaps, just to inquire, and then go elsewhere? Do you remember him at all, Stevens?"

"No, I never saw him before until now. It must have been some other hotel."

"But look at me; look at my face," I tried to say. But I guess I didn't put any voice into it, it was just lip-motion, because he didn't seem to hear.

The manager shrugged amiably, as if to say, "Well that's all there is to it, as far as we're concerned."

I WAS breathing hard, fighting for self-control. "No. No, you can't close this matter. I dem—I ask you to give me one more chance to prove to you that I— that I— Call the night porter, the night bellboy that carried up her bag for her."

They were giving one another looks by now, as if I were some sort of crank.

"Listen, I'm in the full possession of my faculties, I'm not drunk, I wouldn't come in here like this if I weren't positive—"

The manager was going to try to pacify me and ease me out. "But don't you see you must be mistaken, old man? There's absolutely no record of it. We're very strict about those things. If any of my men checked a guest in without entering it on the chart of available rooms, and in the register, I'd fire him on the spot. Was it the Palace? Was it the Commander, maybe? Try to think now, you'll get it."

And with each soothing syllable, he led me a step nearer the entrance.

I looked up suddenly, saw that the desk had already receded a considerable distance behind us, and balked. "No, don't do this. This is no way to— Will you get that night-to-morning bellhop? Will you do that one more thing for me?"

He sighed, as if I were trying his patience sorely. "He's probably home sleeping. Just a minute; I'll find out."

It turned out he wasn't. They were so overcrowded and undermanned at the moment that instead of being at home he was sleeping right down in the basement, to save time coming and going. He came up in a couple of minutes, still buttoning the collar of his uniform. I knew him right away. He didn't look straight at me at first, but at the manager.

"Do you remember seeing this gentleman come here with a lady, at three this morning? Do you remember carrying her bag up to 1006 for her?"

Then he did look straight at me—and didn't seem to know me. "No sir, Mr. DeGrasse."

The shock wasn't as great as the first time; it couldn't have been, twice in succession.

"Don't you remember that quilt you got for her, to spread over the mattress, and I gave you a second quarter for bringing it? You must remember that—dark blue, with little white flowers all over it—"

"No sir, boss."

"But I know your face! I remember that scar just over your eyebrow. And—part your lips a little—that gold cap in front that shows every time you grin."

"No sir, gen'm'n."

MY voice was curling up and dying inside my throat. "Then when you took me down alone with you, the last time, you even said, 'I guess she'll be comfortable'—" I squeezed his upper arm pleadingly. "Don't you remember? Don't you remember?"

"No sir." This time he said it so low you could hardly hear it, as if his training wouldn't let him contradict me too emphatically, but on the other hand he felt obliged to stick to the facts.

I grabbed at the hem of my coat, bunched it up to emphasize the pattern and the color of the material. "Don't you know me by this?" Then I let my fingers trail helplessly down the line of my jaw. "Don't you know my face?"

He didn't answer any more, just shook his head each time.

"What're you doing this for?"

What're you trying to do to me? All of you?" The invisible fumes from that necromancer's ring, that seemed to cut me off from all the world, came swirling up thicker and thicker about me. My voice was strident with a strange new kind of fear, a fear I hadn't known since I was ten.

"You've got me rocky now! You've got me down! Cut it out, I say!"

They were starting to draw back little by little away from me, prudently widen the tight knot they had formed around me. I turned from one to the other, from bellhop to night clerk, night clerk to day clerk, day clerk to manager, and each one as I turned to him retreated slightly.

There was a pause, while I fought against this other, lesser kind of death that was creeping over me—this death called *strangeness*, this snapping of all the customary little threads of cause and effect that are our moorings at other times. Slowly they all drew back from me step by step, until I was left there alone, cut off.

Then the tension exploded. My voice blasted the quiet of the lobby. "I want my wife!" I yelled shatteringly. "Tell me what's become of her. What've you done with her? I came in here with her last night; you can't tell me I didn't. . . ."

They circled, maneuvered around me. I heard the manager say in a harried undertone, "I knew this was going to happen. I could have told you he was going to end up like this. George! Archer! Get him out of here fast!"

My arms were suddenly seized from behind and held. I threshed against the constriction, so violently both my legs flung up clear of the floor at one time, dropped back again, but I couldn't break it. There must have been two of them behind me.

The manager had come in close again, now that I was safely pinioned, no doubt hoping that his nearness would succeed in soft-peddalling the disturbance. "Now will you leave here quietly, or do you want us to call the police and turn you over to them?"

"You'd better call them anyway, Mr. DeGrasse," the day clerk put in. "I've run into this mental type before. He'll only come back in again the minute your back's turned."

"No, I'd rather not, unless he forces me to. It's bad for the hotel. Look at the crowd collecting down here on the main floor already. Tch! Tch!"

He tried to reason with me. "Now listen, give me a break, will you? You don't look like the kind of a man who — Won't you please go quietly? If I have you turned loose outside, will you go away and promise not to come in here again?"

"*Ali-i-i-ice!*" I sent it baying harrowingly down the long vista of lobby, lounges, foyers. I'd been gathering it in me the last few seconds while he was speaking to me. I put my heart and soul into it. It should have shaken down the big old-fashioned chandeliers by the vibration it caused alone. My voice broke under the strain. A woman onlooker somewhere in the background bleated at the very intensity of it.

The manager hit himself between the eyes in consternation. "Oh, this is fierce! Hurry up, call an officer quick, get him out of here."

"See, what did I tell you?" the clerk said knowingly.

I got another chestful of air in, tore loose with it. "Somebody help me! You people standing around looking, isn't there one of you will help me? I brought my wife here last night; now she's gone and they're trying to tell me I never—"

A brown hand suddenly sealed my mouth, was as quickly withdrawn again at the manager's panic-stricken admonition. "George! Archer! Don't lay a hand on him. No rough stuff. Make us liable for damages afterwards, y'know."

Then I heard him and the desk man both give a deep breath of relief. "At last!" And I knew a cop must have come in behind me.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN IS MAD

THE grip on my arms behind my back changed, became single instead of double, one arm instead of two. But I didn't fight against it.

Suddenly I was very passive, unresistant. Because suddenly I had a dread of arrest, confinement. I wanted to preserve my freedom of movement more than all else, to try to find her again. If they threw me in a cell, or put me in a straitjacket, how could I look for her, how could I ever hope to get at the bottom of this mystery?

The police would never believe me. If the very people who had seen her denied her existence, how could I expect those who hadn't to believe in it?

Docile, I let him lead me out to the sidewalk in front of the hotel. The manager came out after us, mopping his forehead, and the desk clerk, and a few of the bolder among the guests who had been watching.

They held a three-cornered consultation in which I took no part. I even let the manager's version of what the trouble was about pass unchallenged. Not that he distorted what had actually happened just now, but he made it seem as if I were mistaken about having brought her there last night.

Finally the harness cop asked, "Well,

do you want to press charges against him for creating a disturbance in your lobby?"

The manager held his hands palms out, horrified. "I should say not. We're having our biggest rush of the year right now; I can't take time off to run down there and go through all that tommyrot. Just see that he doesn't come in again and create any more scenes."

"I'll see to that all right," the cop promised truculently.

They went inside again, the manager and the clerk and the gallery that had watched us from the front steps. Inside to the hotel that had swallowed her alive.

The cop read me a lecture, to which I listened in stony silence. Then he gave me a shove that sent me floundering; said, "Keep moving now, hear me?"

I pointed, and said, "That's my car standing there. May I get in it?" He checked first to make sure it was, then he opened the door, said, "Yeah, get in it and get out of here."

He'd made no slightest attempt to find out what was behind the whole thing, whether there was some truth to my story or not, or whether it was drink, drugs or mental aberration. But then he was only a harness cop. That's why I hadn't wanted to tangle with him.

This strangeness that had risen up around me was nothing to be fought by an ordinary patrolman. I was going to them—the police—but I was going of my own free will and in my own way, not to be dragged in by the scruff of the neck and then put under observation for the next twenty-four hours.

Ten minutes or so later I got in front of the first precinct house I came upon, and went in, and said to the desk sergeant, "I want to talk to the lieutenant in charge."

He stared at me coldly.

"What about?"

"About my wife."

I DIDN'T talk to him alone. Three of his men were present. They were just shapes in the background as far as I was concerned, sitting there very quietly, listening.

I told it simply, hoping against hope I could get them to believe me, feeling somehow I couldn't even before I had started.

"I'm Jimmy Cannon, I'm twenty-five years old, and I'm from Lake City. Last evening after dark my girl and I—her name was Alice Brown—we left there in my car, and at 1.15 this morning we were married by a justice of the peace.

"I think his name was Hulskamp—anyway it's a white house with morning glories all over the porch, about fifty miles this side of Lake City."

"We got in here at three, and they gave her a little room at the Royal Hotel. They couldn't put me up, but they put her up alone. The number was 1006. I know that as well as I know I'm sitting here. This morning when I went over there, they were painting the room and I haven't been able to find a trace of her since.

"I saw her sign the register, but her name isn't on it any more. The night clerk says he never saw her. The bell-boy says he never saw her. Now they've got me so I'm scared and shaky, like a little kid is of the dark. I want you men to help me. Won't you men help me?"

"We'll help you"—said the lieutenant in charge. Slowly, awfully slowly; I didn't like that slowness.—"if we're able to." And I knew what he meant; if we find any evidence that your story is true.

He turned his head toward one of the three shadowy listeners in the background, at random. The one nearest him. Then he changed his mind, shifted his gaze further along, to the one in the middle. "Ainslie, suppose you take a whack at this. Go over to this hotel and see what you can find out. Take him with you."

So, as he stood up, I separated him from the blurred background for the first time. I was disappointed. He was just another man like me, maybe five years older, maybe an inch or two shorter. He could feel cold and hungry, and tired, just as I could. He could believe a lie, just as I could. He couldn't see around corners or through walls, or into hearts, any more than I could. What good was he going to be?

He looked as if he'd seen every rotten thing there was in the world. He looked as if he'd once expected to see other things beside that, but didn't any more. He said, "Yes sir," and you couldn't tell whether he was bored or interested, or liked the detail or resented it, or gave a rap.

On the way over I said, "You've got to find out what became of her. You've got to make them—"

"I'll do what I can." He couldn't seem to get any emotion into his voice. After all, from his point of view, why should he?

"You'll do what you can!" I gasped. "Didn't you ever have a wife?"

He gave me a look, but you couldn't tell what was in it.

WE went straight back to the Royal. He was very business-like, did a streamlined, competent job. Didn't waste a question or a motion, but didn't leave out a single relevant thing either.

I took back what I'd been worried about at first; he was good.

But he wasn't good enough for this, whatever it was.

It went like this: "Let me see your register." He took out a glass, went over the place I pointed out to him where she had signed. Evidently couldn't find any marks of erasure any more than I had with my naked eye.

Then we went up to the room, 1006. The painter was working on the wood trim by now, had all four walls and the ceiling done. It was such a small cubbyhole it wasn't even a half-day's work. He said, "Where was the furniture when you came in here to work this morning? Still in the room, or had the room been cleared?"

"Still in the room; I cleared it myself. There wasn't much; a chair, a scatter-rug, a cot."

"Was the cot made or unmade?"

"Made up."

"Was the window opened or closed when you came in?"

"Closed tight."

"Was the air in the room noticeably stale, as if it had been closed up that way all night, or not noticeably so, as if it had only been closed up shortly before?"

"Terrible, like it hadn't been aired for a week. And believe me, when I notice a place is stuffy, you can bet it's stuffy all right."

"Were there any marks on the walls or floor or anywhere around the room that didn't belong there?"

I knew he meant blood, and gnawed the lining of my cheek fearfully.

"Nothing except plain grime, that needed painting over bad."

We visited the housekeeper next. She took us to the linen room and showed us. "If there're any dark blue quilts in use in this house, it's the first I know about it. The bellboy *could* have come in here at that hour—but all he

would have gotten are maroon ones. And here's my supply list, every quilt accounted for. So it didn't come from here."

We visited the baggage room next. "Look around and see if there's anything in here that resembles that bag of your wife's." I did, and there wasn't. Wherever she had gone, whatever had become of her, her bag had gone with her.

About fifty minutes after we'd first gone in, we were back in my car outside the hotel again. He'd done a good, thorough job; and if I was willing to admit that, it must have been.

We sat there without moving a couple of minutes, me under the wheel. He kept looking at me steadily, sizing me up. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I threw my head back and started to look up the face of the building, story by story. I counted as my eyes rose, and when they'd come to the tenth floor I stopped them there, swung them around the corner of the building to the third window from the end, stopped them there for good. It was a skinnier window than the others. So small, so high up, to hold so much mystery. "Alice," I whispered up to it, and it didn't answer, didn't hear.

HIS voice brought my gaze down from there again. "The burden of the proof has now fallen on you. It's up to you to give me some evidence that she actually went in there. That she actually was with you. That she actually *was*. I wasn't able to find a single person in that building who actually saw her."

I just looked at him, the kind of a look you get from someone right after you stick a knife in his heart. Finally I said with quiet bitterness, "So now I have to prove I had a wife."

The instant, remorseless way he answered that was brutal in itself. "Yes, you do. Can you?"

I pushed my hat off, raked my fingers through my hair, with one and the same gesture. "Could you, if someone asked you in the middle of the street? Could you?"

He peeled out a wallet, flipped it open. A tiny snapshot of a woman's head and shoulders danced in front of my eyes for a split second. He folded it and put it away again. He briefly touched a gold band on his finger, token of that old custom that is starting to revive again, of husbands wearing marriage rings as well as wives.

"And a dozen other ways. You could call Tremont 4102. Or you could call the marriage clerk at the City Hall—"

"But we were just beginning," I said bleakly. "I have no pictures. She was wearing the only ring we had. The certificate was to be mailed to us at Lake City in a few days. You could call this justice of the peace, Hulskamp, out near U. S. 9; he'll tell you—"

"Okay, Cannon, I'll do that. We'll go back to headquarters, I'll tell the lieutenant what I've gotten so far, and I'll do it from there."

Now at last it would be over, now at last it would straightened out. He left me sitting in the room outside the lieutenant's office, while he was in there reporting to him. He seemed to take a long time, so I knew he must be doing more than just reporting; they must be talking it over.

Finally Ainslie looked out at me, but only to say, "What was the name of that justice you say married you, again?"

"Hulskamp."

He closed the door again. I had another long wait. Finally it opened a second time, he hitched his head at me

to come in. The atmosphere when I got in there, was one of hard, brittle curiosity, without any feeling to it. As when you look at somebody afflicted in a way you never heard of before, and wonder how he got that way.

I got that distinctly. Even from Ainslie, and it was fairly oozing from his lieutenant and the other men in the room. They looked and looked and looked at me.

The lieutenant did the talking. "You say a Justice Hulskamp married you. You still say that?"

"A white house sitting off the road, this side of Lake City, just before you get to U. S. 9—"

"Well, there is a Justice Hulskamp, and he does live out there. We just had him on the phone. He says he never married anyone named James Cannon to anyone named Alice Brown, last night or any other night. He hasn't married anyone who looks like you, recently, to anyone who looks as you say she did. He didn't marry anyone at all at any time last night—"

He was going off some place while he talked to me, and his voice was going away after him. Ainslie filled a paper cup with water at the cooler in the corner, strewed it deftly across my face, once each way, as if I were some kind of a potted plant, and one of the other guys picked me up from the floor and put me back on the chair again.

The lieutenant's voice came back again stronger, as if he hadn't gone away after all. "Who were her people in Lake City?"

"She had none; she was an orphan."

"Well, where did she work there?"

"At the house of a family named Beresford, at 20 New Hampshire Avenue. She was in service there, a maid; she lived with them—"

"Give me long distance. Give me

Lake City. This is Michianopolis Police headquarters. I want to talk to a party named Beresford, 20 New Hampshire Avenue."

The ring came back fast. "We're holding a man here who claims he married a maid working for you. A girl by the name of Alice Brown."

He'd hung up before I even knew it was over. "There's no maid employed there. They don't know anything about any Alice Brown, never heard of her."

CHAPTER IV

LOOK BACKWARD NOW

I STAYED on the chair this time. I just didn't hear so clearly for a while, everything sort of fuzzy.

"... Hallucinations ... And he's in a semi-hysterical condition right now. Notice how jerky his reflexes are?" Someone was chopping the edge of his hand at my kneecaps. "Seems harmless. Let him go. It'll probably wear off. I'll give him a sedative." Someone snapped a bag shut, left the room.

The lieutenant's voice was as flat as it was deadly, and it brooked no argument. "You never had a wife, Cannon!"

I could see only Ainslie's face in the welter before me. "You have, though, haven't you?" I said, so low none of the others could catch it.

The lieutenant was still talking to me. "Now get out of here before we change our minds and call an ambulance to take you away. And don't go back into any more hotels raising a row."

I hung around outside; I wouldn't go away. Where was there to go? One of the others came out, looked at me fleetingly in passing, said with humorous tolerance, "You better get out of here before the lieutenant catches you," and went on about his business.

I waited until I saw Ainslie come out. Then I went up to him. "I've got to talk to you; you've got to listen to me—"

"Why? The matter's closed. You heard the lieutenant."

He went back to some sort of a locker room. I went after him.

"You're not supposed to come back here. Now look, Cannon, I'm telling you for your own good, you're looking for trouble if you keep this up."

"Don't turn me down," I said hoarsely, tugging away at the seam of his sleeve. "Can't you see the state I'm in? I'm like someone in a dark room, crying for a match. I'm like someone drowning, crying for a helping hand. I can't make it alone any more."

There wasn't anyone in the place but just the two of us. My pawing grip slipped down his sleeve to the hem of his coat, and I was looking up at him from my knees. What did I care? There was no such thing as pride or dignity any more. I would have crawled flat along the floor on my belly, just to get a word of relief out of anyone.

"Forget you're a detective, and I'm a case. I'm appealing to you as one human being to another. I'm appealing to you as one husband to another. Don't turn your back on me like that, don't pull my hands away from your coat. I don't ask you to do anything for me any more; you don't have to lift a finger. Just say, 'Yes, you had a wife, Cannon.' Just give me that one glimmer of light in the dark. Say it even if you don't mean it, even if you don't believe it, say it anyway. Oh, say it, will you—"

H E DREW the back of his hand slowly across his mouth, either in disgust at my abasement or in a sudden access of pity. Maybe a little of both.

His voice was hoarse, as if he were sore at the spot I was putting him in.

"Give me anything," he said, shaking me a little and jogging me to my feet, "the slightest thing, to show that she ever existed, to show that there ever was such a person outside of your own mind, and I'll be with you to the bitter end. Give me a pin that she used to fasten her dress with. Give me a grain of powder, a stray hair; but prove that it was hers. But I can't do it unless you do."

"And I have nothing to show you. Not a pin, not a grain of powder."

I took a few dragging steps toward the locker room door. "You're doing something to me that I wouldn't do to a dog," I mumbled. "What you're doing to me is worse than if you were to kill me. You're locking me up in shadows for the rest of my life. You're taking my mind away from me. You're condemning me slowly but surely to madness, to being without a mind. It won't happen right away, but sooner or later, in six months or in a year—Well, I guess that's that."

I fumbled my way out of the locker room and down the passageway outside, guiding myself with one arm along the wall, and past the sergeant's desk and down the steps, and then I was out in the street.

I left my car there where it was. What did I want with it? I started to walk, without knowing where I was going. I walked a long time, and a good long distance.

Then all of a sudden I noticed a lighted drug store—it was dark by now—across the way. I must have passed others before now, but this was the first one I noticed.

I crossed over and looked in the open doorway. It had telephone booths; I could see them at the back, to one

side. I moved on a few steps, stopped, and felt in my pockets. I found a quill toothpick, and I dug the point of it good and hard down the back of my finger, ripped the skin open. Then I threw it away. I wrapped a handkerchief around the finger, and I turned around and went inside.

I said to the clerk, "Give me some iodine. My cat just scratched me and I don't want to take any chances."

He said, "Want me to put it on for you?"

I said, "No, gimme the whole bottle. I'll take it home; we're out of it."

I paid him for it and moved over to one side and started to thumb through one of the directories in the rack. Just as he went back inside the prescription room, I found my number. I went into the end booth and pulled the slide closed. I took off my hat and hung it over the phone mouthpiece, sort of making myself at home.

Then I sat down and started to undo the paper he'd just wrapped around the bottle. When I had it off, I pulled the knot of my tie out a little further to give myself lots of room. Then I took the stopper out of the bottle and tilted my head back and braced myself.

Something that felt like a baseball bat came chopping down on the arm I was bringing up, and nearly broke it in two, and the iodine sprayed all over the side of the booth. Ainslie was standing there in the half-opened slide.

He said, "Come on outta there!" and gave me a pull by the collar of my coat that did it for me. He didn't say anything more until we were out on the sidewalk in front of the place. Then he stopped and looked me over from head to foot as if I was some kind of a microbe. He said, "Well, it was worth coming all this way after you, at that!"

My car was standing there; I must have left the keys in it and he must have tailed me in that. He thumbed it, and I went over and climbed in and sat there limply. He stayed outside, with one foot on the running board.

I said, "I can't live with shadows, Ainslie. I'm frightened, too frightened to go on. You don't know what the nights'll be like from now on. And the days won't be much better. I'd rather go now, fast. Show her to me on a slab at the morgue and I won't whimper. Show her to me all cut up in small pieces and I won't bat an eyelash. But don't say she never was."

"I guessed what was coming from the minute I saw you jab yourself with that toothpick." He watched sardonically while I slowly unwound the handkerchief, that had stayed around my finger all this time. The scratch had hardly bled at all. Just a single hair-line of red was on the handkerchief.

We both looked at that.

THEN more of the handkerchief came open. We both looked at the initials in the corner. *A. B.* We both, most likely, smelled the faint sweetness that still came from it at the same time. Very faint, for it was such a small handkerchief.

We both looked at each other, and both our minds made the same discovery at the same time. I was the one who spoke it aloud. "It's hers," I said grimly; "the wife that didn't exist."

"This is a fine time to come out with it," he said quietly. "Move over, I'll drive." That was his way of saying, "I'm in."

I said, "I remember now. I got a cinder in my eye, during the drive in, and she lent me her handkerchief to take it out with; I didn't have one of my own on me. I guess I forgot to give

it back to her. And this—is it.” I looked at him rebukingly. “What a difference a few square inches of linen can make. Without it, I was a madman. With it, I’m a rational being who enlists your cooperation. I could have picked it up in any five-and-ten.”

“No. You didn’t turn it up when it would have done you the most good, back at the station house. You only turned it up several minutes after you were already supposed to have gulped a bottle of iodine. I could tell by your face you’d forgotten about it until then yourself. I think that does make a difference. To me it does, anyway.” He meshed gears.

“And what’re you going to do about it?”

“Since we don’t believe in the supernatural, our only possible premise is that there’s been some human agency at work.”

I noticed the direction he was taking. “Aren’t you going back to the Royal?”

“There’s no use bothering with the hotel. D’you see what I mean?”

“No, I don’t,” I said bluntly. “That was where she disappeared.”

“The focus for this wholesale case of astigmatism is elsewhere, outside the hotel. It’s true we could try to break them down, there at the hotel. But what about the justice, what about the Beresford house in Lake City? I think it’ll be simpler to try to find out the reason rather than the mechanics of the disappearance.

“And the reason lies elsewhere. Because you brought her to the hotel from the justice’s. And to the justice’s from Lake City. The hotel was the last stage. Find out why the justice denies he married you, and we don’t have to find out why the hotel staff denies having seen her. Find out why the Beresford

house denies she was a maid there, and we don’t have to find out why the justice denies he married you.

“Find out, maybe, something else, and we don’t have to find out why the Beresford house denies she was a maid there. The time element keeps moving backward through the whole thing. Now talk to me. How long did you know her? How well? How much did you know about her?”

“NOT long. Not well. Practically nothing. And yet all I wanted, all I needed to. It was one of those story-book things. I met her a week ago last night. She was sitting on a bench in the park, as if she were lonely, didn’t have a friend in the world. I don’t make a habit of accosting girls on park benches, but she looked so dejected it got to me.

“Well, that’s how we met. I walked her home afterwards to where she said she lived. But when we got there—holly smoke, it was a mansion! I got nervous, said: ‘Gee, this is a pretty swell place for a guy like me to be bringing anyone home to, just a clerk in a store.’

“She laughed and said, ‘I’m only the maid. Disappointed?’ I said, ‘No, I would have been disappointed if you’d been anybody else, because then you wouldn’t be in my class.’ She seemed relieved after I said that. She said, ‘Gee, I’ve waited so long to find someone who’d like me for myself.’

“Well, to make a long story short, we made an appointment to meet at that same bench the next night. I waited there for two hours and she never showed up. Luckily I went back there the next night again—and there she was. She explained she hadn’t been able to get out the night before; the people where she worked were having company or something.

"When I took her home that night I asked her name, which I didn't know yet, and that seemed to scare her. She got sort of flustered, and I saw her look at her handbag. It had the initials A.B. on it; I'd already noticed that the first night I met her. She said, 'Alice Brown.'

"By the third time we met we were already nuts about each other. I asked her whether she'd take a chance and marry me. She said, 'Is it possible someone wants to marry little Alice Brown, who hasn't a friend in the world?' I said yes, and that was all there was to it.

"Only, when I left her that night, she seemed kind of scared. First I thought she was scared I'd change my mind, back out, but it wasn't that. She said, 'Jimmy, let's hurry up and do it, don't let's put off. Let's do it while—while we have the chance'; and she hung onto my sleeve tight with both hands.

"So the next day I asked for a week off, which I had coming to me from last summer anyway, and I waited for her with the car on the corner three blocks away from the house where she was in service. She came running as if the devil were behind her, but I thought that was because she didn't want to keep me waiting. She just had that one little overnight bag with her.

"She jumped in, and her face looked kind of white, and she said, 'Hurry, Jimmy, hurry!' And away we went. And until we were outside of Lake City, she kept looking back every once in a while, as if she were afraid someone was coming after us."

AINSLIE didn't say much after all that rigamarole I'd given him. Just five words, after we'd driven on for about ten minutes or so. "She was

afraid of something." And then in another ten minutes, "And whatever it was, it's what's caught up with her now."

We stopped at the filling station where Alice and I had stopped for gas the night before. I looked over the attendants, said: "There's the one serviced us." Ainslie called him over, played a pocket light on my face.

"Do you remember servicing this man last night? This man, and a girl with him?"

"Nope, not me. Maybe one of the oth—"

Neither of us could see his hands at the moment; they were out of range below the car door. I said, "He's got a white scar across the back of his right hand. I saw it last night when he was wiping the windshield."

Ainslie said, "Hold it up."

He did, and there was a white cicatrice across it, where stitches had been taken or something. Ainslie said, "Now whaddye say?"

It didn't shake him in the least. "I still say no. Maybe he saw me at one time or another, but I've never seen him, to my knowledge, with or without a girl." He waited a minute, then added: "Why should I deny it, if it was so?"

"We'll be back, in a day or in a week or in a month," Ainslie let him know grimly, "but we'll be back—to find that out."

We drove on. "Those four square inches of linen handkerchief will be wearing pretty thin, if this keeps up," I muttered dejectedly after a while.

"Don't let that worry you," he said, looking straight ahead. "Once I'm sold, I don't unsell easily."

We crossed U. S. 9 a half-hour later. A little white house came skimming along out of the darkness. "This is

where I was married to a ghost," I said.

He braked, twisted the grip of the door latch. My hand shot down, stopped his arm.

"Wait; before you go in, listen to this. It may help out that handkerchief. There'll be a round mirror in the hall, to the left of the door, with antlers over it for a hatrack. In their parlor, where he read the service, there'll be an upright piano, with brass candle holders sticking out of the front of it, above the keyboard. It's got a scarf on it that ends in a lot of little plush balls. And on the music rack, the top selection is a copy of *Kiss Me Again*. And on the wall there's a painting of a lot of fruit rolling out of a basket. And this housekeeper, he calls her Dora."

"That's enough," he said in that toneless voice of his. "I told you I was with you anyway, didn't I?" He got out and went over and rang the bell. I went with him, of course.

They must have been asleep; they didn't answer right away. Then the housekeeper opened the door and looked out at us. Before we could say anything, we heard the justice call down the stairs, "Who is it, Dora?"

Ainslie asked if we could come in and talk to him, and straightened his necktie in the round mirror to the left of the door, with antlers over it.

Hulskamp came down in a bathrobe, and Ainslie said: "You married this man to a girl named Alice Brown last night." It wasn't a question.

The justice said, "No. I've already been asked that once, over the phone, and I said I hadn't. I've never seen this young man before." He even put on his glasses to look at me better.

Ainslie didn't argue the matter, almost seemed to take him at his word. "I won't ask you to let me see your records," he said drily, "because they'll

undoubtedly—bear out your word."

He strolled as far as the parlor entrance, glanced in idly. I peered over his shoulder. There was an upright piano with brass candle sconces. A copy of *Kiss Me Again* was topmost on its rack. A painting of fruit rolling out of a basket daubed the wall.

"They certainly will!" snapped the justice resentfully.

The housekeeper put her oar in. "I'm a witness at all the marriages the justice performs, and I'm sure the young man's mistaken. I don't ever recall—"

CHAPTER V

JOURNEY'S END

AINSLIE steadied me with one hand clasp my arm, and led me out without another word. We got in the car again. Their door closed, somewhat forcefully.

I pounded the rim of the wheel helplessly with my fist. I said, "What is it? Some sort of wholesale conspiracy? But *why*? She's not important; I'm not important."

He threw in the clutch, the little white house ebbed away in the night-darkness behind us.

"It's some sort of a conspiracy, all right," he said. "We've got to get the reason for it. That's the quickest, shortest way to clear it up. To take any of the weaker links, the bellboy at the hotel or that filling station attendant, and break them down, would not only take days, but in the end would only get us some anonymous individual who'd either threatened them or paid them to forget having seen your wife. and we wouldn't be much further than before. If we can get the reason behind it all, the source, we don't have to bother with any of these small fry. That's why we're heading back to Lake

City instead of just concentrating on that hotel in Michianapolis."

We made Lake City by one A.M. and I showed him the way to New Hampshire Avenue. Number 20 was a massive corner house, and we glided up to it from the back, along the side street; braked across the way from the service entrance I'd always brought her back to. Not a light was showing anywhere.

"Don't get out yet," he said. "When you brought her home nights, you brought her to this back door, right?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, did you ever actually see her open it and go in, or did you just leave her here by it and walk off without waiting to see where she went?"

I felt myself get a little frightened again. This was something that hadn't occurred to me until now. "I didn't once actually see the door open and her go inside, now that I come to think of it. She seemed to—to want me to walk off without waiting. She didn't say so, but I could tell. I thought maybe it was because she didn't want her employers to catch on she was going around with anyone. I'd walk off, down that way—"

I pointed to the corner behind us, on the next avenue over. "Then when I got there, I'd look back from there each time. As anyone would. Each time I did, she wasn't there any more. I thought she'd gone in, but—it's funny, I never saw her go in."

He nodded gloomily. "Just about what I thought. For all you know, she didn't even belong 'n that house, never went in there at all. A quick little dash, while your back was turned, would have taken her around the corner of the house and out of sight. And the city would have swallowed her up."

"But why?" I said helplessly.

He didn't answer that. We hadn't had a good look at the front of the house yet. As I have said, we had approached from the rear, along the side street. He got out of the car now, and I followed suit. We walked down the few remaining yards to the corner, and turned and looked all up and down the front of it.

It was an expensive limestone building; it spelt real dough, even looking at it in the dark as we were. There was a light showing from the front, through one of the tall ground-floor windows—but a very dim one, almost like a night light. It didn't send any shine outside; just peered wanly around the sides of the blind that had been drawn on the inside.

Something moved close up against the door-facing, stirred a little. If it hadn't been white limestone, it wouldn't have even been noticeable at all. We both saw it at once; I caught instinctively at Ainslie's arm, and a cold knife of dull fear went through me—though why I couldn't tell.

"CREPE on the front door," he whispered. "Somebody's dead in there. Whether she did go in here or didn't, just the same I think we'd better have a look at the inside of this place."

I took a step in the direction of the front door. He recalled me with a curt gesture. "And by that I don't mean march up the front steps, ring the doorbell, and flash my badge in their eyes."

"Then how?"

Brakes ground somewhere along the side street behind us. We turned our heads and a lacquered sedan-truck had drawn up directly before the service door of 20 New Hampshire Avenue. "Just in time," Ainslie said. "This is how."

We started back toward it. The driver and a helper had gotten down, were unloading batches of camp chairs and stacking them up against the side of the truck, preparatory to taking them in.

"For the services tomorrow, I suppose," Ainslie grunted. He said to the driver: "Who is it that died, bud?"

"Mean to say you ain't heard? It's in alla papers."

"We're from out of town."

"Alma Beresford, the heiress. Richest gal in twenty-four states. She was an orphan, too. Pretty soft for her guardian; not another soul to get the cush but him."

"What was it?" For the first time since I'd known him, you couldn't have called Ainslie's voice toneless; it was sort of springy like a rubber band that's pulled too tight.

"Heart attack, I think." The truckman snapped his fingers. "Like that. Shows you that rich or poor, when you gotta go, you gotta go."

Ainslie asked only one more question. "Why you bringing these setups at an hour like this? They're not going to hold the services in the middle of the night, are they?"

"Nah, but first thing in the morning; so early there wouldn't be a chance to get 'em over here unless we delivered 'em ahead of time." He was suddenly staring fascinatedly down at the silvery lining of Ainslie's hand.

Ainslie's voice was toneless again. "Tell you what you fellows are going to do. You're going to save yourselves the trouble of hauling all those camp chairs inside, and you're going to get paid for it in the bargain. Lend us those work aprons y'got on."

He slipped them something apiece; I couldn't see whether it was two dollars or five. "Gimme your delivery

ticket; I'll get it receipted for you. You two get back in the truck and lie low."

We both doffed our hats and coats, put them in our own car, rolled our shirtsleeves, put on the work aprons, and rang the service bell. There was a short wait and then a wire-sheathed bulb over the entry glimmered pallidly as an indication someone was coming. The door opened and a gaunt-faced sandy-haired man looked out at us. It was hard to tell just how old he was. He looked like a butler, but he was dressed in a business suit, so he must have occupied some other position in the household.

"Camp chairs from the Thebes Funeralary Chapel," Ainslie said, reading from the delivery ticket.

"Follow me and I'll show you where they're to go," he said in a hushed voice. "Be as quiet as you can. We've only just succeeded in getting Mr. Hastings to lie down and try to rest a little." The guardian, I supposed. In which case this anemic-looking customer would be the guardian's Man Friday.

We each grabbed up a double armful of the camp chairs and went in after him. They were corded together in batches of half a dozen. We could have cleared up the whole consignment at once—they were lightweight—but Ainslie gave me the eye not to; I guess he wanted to have an excuse to prolong our presence as much as possible.

You went down a short delivery passageway, then up a few steps into a brightly lighted kitchen. We hadn't been able to see it from the street.

A hatchet-faced woman in maid's livery was sitting by a table crying away under one eye-shading hand, a teacup and a tumbler of gin before her. Judging by the redness of her nose, she'd been at it for hours. "My baby,"

she'd mew every once in a while.

We followed him out at the other side, through a pantry, a gloomy-looking dining room, and finally into a huge cavernous front room, eerily suffused with flickering candlelight that did no more than heighten the shadows in its far corners. It was this wavering pallor that we must have seen from outside, around the front of the house.

AN OPEN coffin rested on a flower-massed bier at the upper end of the place, a lighted taper glimmering at each corner of it. A violet velvet pall had been spread over the top of it, concealing what lay within.

But a tiny peaked outline, that could have been made by an uptilted nose, was visible in the plush at one extremity of its length. That knife of dread gave an excruciating little twist in me, and again I didn't know why—or refused to admit I did. It was as if I instinctively sensed the nearness of something—or someone—familiar.

The rest of the room, before this monument to mortality, had been left clear, its original furniture moved aside or taken out. The man who had admitted us gave us our instructions in a sepulchral voice.

"Arrange them in four rows, here in front of the bier. Leave an aisle through them. And be sure and leave enough space up ahead for the divine who will deliver the oration." Then he retreated to the door and stood watching us for a moment, moiling his hands together with a sickening sort of obsequious gesture.

Ainslie produced a knife from the pocket of his borrowed apron, began severing the cording that bound the frames of the camp chairs together. I opened them one at a time as he freed them and began setting them up in

quadruple rows, being as slow about it as I could.

There was a slight sound and the factotum had tiptoed back toward the kitchen for a moment, perhaps for a sip of the comfort gin. Ainslie raised his head, caught my eye, speared his thumb at the bier imperatively. I was the nearer of us to it at the moment. I knew what he meant: look and see who it was.

I went cold all over, but I put down the camp chair I was fiddling with and edged over toward it on arched feet. The taper-flames bent down flat as I approached them, and sort of hissed. Sweat needled out under the roots of my hair. I went around by the head, where that tiny little peak was, reached out, and gingerly took hold of the corners of the velvet pall, which fell loosely over the two sides of the coffin without quite meeting the headboard.

Just as my wrists flexed to tip it back, Ainslie coughed warningly. There was a whispered returning tread from beyond the doorway. I let go, took a quick side-jump back toward where I'd been. It didn't carry me all the way back by any means, the room was such a big barn of a place, but it carried me sufficiently far away from the bier to look innocuous.

I glanced around and the secretary fellow had come back again, was standing there with his eyes fixed on me. I pretended to be measuring off the distance for the pulpit with my foot.

"You men are rather slow about it," he said, thin lipped.

"You want 'em just so, don't you?" Ainslie answered. He went out to get the second batch. I pretended one of the stools had jammed and I was having trouble getting it open, as an excuse to linger behind. The secretary was on his guard. He lingered too.

The dick took care of that. He waited until he was halfway back with his load of camp chairs, then dropped them all over the pantry floor with a clatter, to draw the watchdog off.

It worked. He gave a huff of annoyance, turned and went in to bawl Ainslie out for the noise he had made. The minute the doorway cleared, I gave a cat-like spring back toward the velvet mound. This time I made it. I flung the pall back—

Then I let go of it, and the lighted candles started spinning around my head, faster and faster, until they made a comet-like track of fire. The still face staring up at me from the coffin was Alice's. Last night a bride. Tonight a corpse.

CHAPTER VI

BURY ME NOT—

I FELT my knees hit something, and I was swaying back and forth on them there beside the bier. I could hear somebody coming back toward the room, but whether it was Ainslie or the other guy, I didn't know and didn't care. Then an arm went around me and steadied me to my feet once more, so I knew it was Ainslie.

"It's her," I said brokenly. "Alice. I can't understand it; she must—have—been this rich girl, Alma Beresford, all the time—"

He let go of me, took a quick step over to the coffin, flung the pall even further back than I had. He dipped his head, as if he was staring nearsightedly. Then he turned and I never felt my shoulder grabbed so hard before, or since. His fingers felt like steel claws that went in, and met in the middle. For a minute I didn't know whether he was attacking me or not; and I was too dazed to care.

He was pointing at the coffin. "Look at that!" he demanded. I didn't know what he meant. He shook me brutally, either to get me to understand or because he was so excited himself. "*She's not dead.* Watch her chest cavern."

I fixed my eyes on it. You could tell only by watching the line where the white satin of her burial gown met the violet quilting of the coffin lining. The white was faintly, but unmistakably and rhythmically rising and falling. The tides of life were still there.

"They've got her either drugged or in a coma—"

He broke off short, let go of me as if my shoulder were red hot and burned his fingers. His hand flashed down and up again, and he'd drawn and sighted over my shoulder. "Put it down or I'll let you have it right where you are!" he said.

Something thudded to the carpet. I turned and the secretary was standing there in the doorway, palms out, a fallen revolver lying at his feet.

"Go over and get that, Cannon," Ainslie ordered. "This looks like the finale now. Let's see what we've got here."

There was an arched opening behind him, leading out to the front entrance hall, I suppose, and the stairway to the upper floors. We'd come in from the rear, remember. Velvet drapes had been drawn closed over that arch, sealing it up, the whole time we'd been in there.

HE MUST have come in through there. I bent down before the motionless secretary, and with my fingers an inch away from the fallen gun at his feet, I heard the impact of a head blow and Ainslie gave the peculiar guttural groan of someone going down into unconsciousness.

The secretary's foot snaked out and sped the gun skidding far across to the other side of the room. Then he dropped on my curved back like a dead weight and I went down flat under him, pushing my face into the parquet flooring. The floor had been left bare in the room.

He kept aiming blows at the side of my head from above, but he had only his fists to work with at the moment, and even the ones that landed weren't as effective as whatever it was that had been used on Ainslie. I reached upward and over, caught the secretary by the shoulders of his coat, tugged and at the same time jerked my body out from under him in the opposite direction; and he came flying up in a backward somersault and landed sprawling a few feet away. He was a lightweight anyway.

I got up and looked. Ainslie lay inert, face down on the floor to one side of the coffin, something gleaming wet down the part of his hair. There was a handsome but vicious-looking gray-haired man in a brocaded dressing gown standing behind him holding a gun on me, trying to cow me with it.

"Get him, Mr. Hastings," panted the one I'd just flung off.

It would have taken more than a gun to hold me, after what I'd been through. I charged at him, around Ainslie's form. He evidently didn't want to fire, didn't want the noise of a shot to be heard there in the house. Instead, he reversed his gun, swung the butt high up over his shoulder; and my own head-first charge undid me. I couldn't swerve or brake in time, plunged right in under it. A hissing, spark-shedding skyrocket seemed to tear through the top of my head, and I went down into nothingness as Ainslie had.

. . . For an hour after I recovered

consciousness I was in complete darkness. Such utter darkness that I couldn't be sure the blow hadn't affected my optic nerve, temporarily put my eyesight out of commission.

I was in a sitting position, on something cold—stone flooring probably—with my hands lashed behind me, around something equally cold and sweating moisture, most likely a water pipe. My feet were tied too, and there was a gag over my mouth. My head blazed with pain.

After what seemed like an age, a smoky gray light began to dilute the blackness; so at least my eyesight wasn't impaired. As the light strengthened it showed me first a barred grate high up on the wall through which the dawn was peering in. Next, a dingy basement around me, presumably that of the same New Hampshire Avenue house we had entered several hours ago.

And finally, if that was any consolation to me, Ainslie sitting facing me from across the way, in about the same fix I was. Hands and feet secured, sitting before another pipe, mouth also gagged. A dark skein down one side of his forehead, long since dried, marked the effect of the blow he had received. His eyes were open and fixed on me, so he'd probably recovered consciousness some time before I had.

We just stared at each other, unable to communicate. We could turn our heads. He shook his from side to side deprecatingly. I knew what he meant: "Fine spot we ended up in, didn't we?" I nodded, meaning, "You said it."

But we were enjoying perfect comfort and peace of mind, compared to what was to follow. It came within about half an hour at the most. Sounds of activity began to penetrate to where we were. First a desultory moving about sounded over our heads, as if

someone were looking things over to make sure everything was in order. Then something heavy was set down: it might have been a table, a desk—or a pulpit.

This cellar compartment we were in seemed to be directly under that large front room where the coffin was and where the obsequies were to be held. I remember now there had been no carpeting on it last night when we were in there. Originally a ballroom, maybe.

A DAWNING horror began to percolate through me. I looked at Ainslie and tried to make him understand what I was thinking. I didn't need to, he was thinking the same thing. I could tell by the look in his eyes.

She'd been alive when we'd last seen her, last night. Early this same morning, rather. What were they going to do—go ahead with it anyway?

A car door clashed faintly, somewhere off in the distance outside. It must have been at the main entrance of this very house we were in, for within a moment or two new footsteps sounded overhead, picking their way along, as down an aisle under guidance. Then something scraped slightly, like the leg rests of a camp chair straining under the weight of a body.

It repeated itself eight or ten times after that. The impact of a car door outside in the open, then the sedate footsteps over us—some the flat dull ones of men, some the sharp brittle ones of women—then the slight shift and click of the camp chairs. I didn't have to be told its meaning; probably Ainslie didn't either. The mourners were arriving for the services.

It was probably unintentional, our having been placed directly below like this; but it was the most diabolic torture that could ever have been devised.

Was she dead yet, or wasn't she? But she had to be before—

They couldn't be that low. Maybe the drug she'd been under last night was timed to take fatal effect between then and now. But suppose it hadn't?

The two of us were writhing there like maimed snakes. Ainslie kept trying to bring his knees up and meet them with his chin, and at first I couldn't understand what his idea was. It was to snag the gag in the cleft between his two tightly pressed knees and pull it down, or at least dislodge it sufficiently to get some sound out. I immediately began trying the same thing myself.

Meanwhile an ominous silence had descended above us. No more car door thuds, no more footsteps mincing down the aisle to their seats. The services were being held—And for someone whom Ainslie and I had ever reason to believe was still alive!

The lower half of my face was all numb by now from hitting my bony up-ended knees so many times. And still I couldn't work it. Neither could he. The rounded structure of the kneecaps kept them from getting it close enough to our lips to act as pincers. If only one of us could have made it. If we could hear them that clearly down here, they would have been able to hear us yell up there. And they couldn't all be in on the plot, all those mourners, friends of the family or whoever they were. They must all be innocent dupes: all but the guardian and his secretary.

Bad as the preliminaries had been, they were as nothing compared to the concluding stages that we now had to endure listening to. There was a sudden concerted mass shifting and scraping above, as if everyone had risen to his feet at one time.

Then a slow, single-file shuffling

started in, going in one direction, re-turning in another. The mourners were filing around the coffin one by one for a last look at the departed. The departed who was still of the living.

After the last of them had gone out, and while the incessant cracking of car doors was still under way outside, marking the forming of the funeral cortege, there was a quick, business-like converging of not more than two pairs of feet on one certain place—where the coffin was. A hurried shifting about for a moment or two, then a sharp hammering on wood penetrated to where we were, and nearly drove me crazy; they were fastening down the lid.

After a slight pause that might have been employed in reopening the closed room doors, more feet came in, all male, and moving toward that one certain place where the first two had preceded them. These must be the pallbearers, four or six of them. There was a brief scraping and jockeying about while they lifted the casket to their shoulders, and then the slow, measured tread with which they carried it outside to the waiting hearse.

Then silence.

I LET my head fall inertly downward as far over as I could bend it, so Ainslie wouldn't see the tears running out of my eyes. Tears of horror and helplessness and rage.

Motion attracted me and I looked blurredly up again. He was shaking his head steadily back and forth. "Don't give up, keep trying," he meant to say. "It's not too late yet."

But we never got those gags out, to the end; and we never freed our hands and ankles of those bonds, the way they so easily do in stories. Whoever had tied us up had made a good job of it.

About five or ten minutes after the

hearse had left, a door opened surreptitiously somewhere close at hand; and a stealthy, frightened tread began to descend toward us, evidently along some steps that were back of me.

Ainslie could see who it was—he was facing that way—but I couldn't until the hatchet-faced maid we had seen crying in the kitchen the night before suddenly sidled out between us. She kept looking back in the direction from which she'd just come, as if scared of her life. She had an ordinary kitchen bread knife in her hand. She wasn't in livery now, but black-hatted, coated and gloved, as if she had started out for the cemetery with the rest and then slipped back unnoticed.

She went for Ainslie's bonds first, cackling terrifiedly the whole time she was sawing away at them. "Oh, if they ever find out I did this, I don't know what they'll do to me! I didn't even know you were down here until I happened to overhear Mr. Hastings whisper to his secretary just now before they left, 'Leave the other two where they are, we can attend to them when we come back.' Which one of you is her Jimmy? She confided in me; I knew about it; I helped her slip in and out of the house that whole week. I took her place under the bedcovers, so that when he'd look in he'd think she was asleep in her room.

"They had no right to do this to you and your friend, Jimmy, even though you were the cause of her death. The excitement was too much for her, she'd been so carefully brought up. She got this heart attack and died. She was already unconscious when they brought her back—from wherever it was you ran off with her to.

"I don't know why I'm helping you. You're a reckless, bad, fortune-hunting scoundrel; Mr. Hastings says so. The

marriage wouldn't have been legal anyway; she didn't use her right name. It cost him all kinds of money to hush everyone up about it and destroy the documents, so it wouldn't be found out and you wouldn't have a chance to blackmail her later.

"You killed my baby! But still he should have turned you over to the police, not kept you tied up all ni—"

At this point she finally got through, and Ainslie's gag flew out of his mouth like one of those feathered darts kids shoot through a blow-tube. "I *am* the police!" he panted. "And your 'baby' has been murdered, or will be within the next few minutes, by Hastings himself, not this boy here! She was still alive in that coffin at two o'clock this morning. You didn't know that, did you?!"

SHE gave a scream like the noon whistle of a factory. He kept her from fainting, or at any rate falling in a heap, by pinning her to the wall, took the knife away from her. He freed me in one-tenth of the time it had taken her to rid him of his own bonds. "No," she was groaning hollowly through her hands, "her own family doctor, a lifelong friend of her father and mother, examined her after she was gone, made out the death certificate. He's an honest man, he wouldn't do that—"

"He's old, I take it. Did he see her face?" Ainslie interrupted.

A look of almost stupid consternation froze on her own face. "No. I was at the bedside with him; it was covered. But only a moment before she'd been lying there in full view. The doctor and I both saw her from the door. Then Mr. Hastings had a fainting spell in the other room, and we ran to help him. When the doctor came in

again to proceed with his examination, Mr. Chivers had covered her face—to spare Mr. Hastings' feelings.

"Dr. Meade just examined her body. Mr. Hastings pleaded with him not to remove the covering, said he couldn't bear it. And my pet was still wearing the little wristwatch her mother gave her before she died—"

"They substituted another body for hers, that's all; I don't care how many wrist watches it had on it," Ainslie told her brutally. "Stole that of a young girl approximately her own age who had just died from heart failure or some other natural cause, most likely from one of the hospital morgues, and put it over on the doddering old family doctor and you both.

"If you look, you'll probably find something in the papers about a vanished corpse. The main thing is to stop that burial; I'm not positive enough on it to take a chance. It may be she in the coffin after all, and not the substitute. Where was the interment to be?"

"In the family plot, at Cypress Hills Cemetery." The maid shuddered.

"Come on, Cannon; got your circulation back yet?" He was at the top of the stairs already. "Get the local police and tell them to meet us out there," he barked at the half-hysterical woman, "unless you're in this stink as deep as they are, yourself!"

Which was just a spur to get a move into her. You could tell by the horrified daze she was in she hadn't realized until now what was going on right under her nose.

A INSLIE'S badge was all that got us into the cemetery, which was private. The casket had already been lowered out of sight. They were throwing the first shovelfuls of earth over it as we burst through the little ring of

sedate, bowing mourners—two wild-eyed tousled maniacs who sent them screaming and scattering in all directions.

The last thing I saw was Ainslie snatching an implement from one of the cemetery workers and jumping down bodily into the opening, feet first. I didn't see anything more after that, because everything had gone red as far as I was concerned.

The face of that silver-haired devil, her guardian Hastings, had focused in on my inflamed eyes.

A squad of Lake City police, arriving only minutes after us, were all that saved his life. It took three of them to pull me off him, and they told me later three of his ribs were already fractured by that time.

Ainslie's voice was what brought me to, more than anything else. "It's all right, Cannon," he was yelling over and over from somewhere behind me, "it's all right. It's not her. It's the substitute."

I stumbled over to the lip of the grave between two of the cops and took a look down. It was the face of a stranger that was peering up at me through the shattered coffin lid. I turned away, and they made the mistake of letting go of me.

I went at the secretary this time; Hastings was still stretched out more dead than alive. "What've you done with her? Where've you got her?"

"That ain't the way to make him answer," Ainslie said, and for the second and last time throughout the whole affair his voice wasn't toneless. "This is!"

Wham! We had to take about six steps forward to catch up with the secretary where he was now.

Ainslie's method was all right at that. The secretary talked—fast. . . .

Alice was safe; but she wouldn't have been, much longer. After the mourners had had a last look at her in the coffin, Hastings and the secretary had locked her up for safe keeping—stupefied, of course—and substituted the other body for burial.

And Alice's turn was to come later, when, under cover of night, she was to be spirited away to a hunting lodge in the hills—the lodge that had belonged to her father. There she could have been murdered at leisure, without benefit of death certificate, buried without benefit of mourners.

When we'd flashed back to the New Hampshire Avenue house in a police car, and unlocked the door of the little den where she'd been secreted; and when the police physician who accompanied us brought her out of the opiate they'd kept her under—whose arms were the first to go around her, whose face was the first she saw looking down at her?

Whose do you think?

"Jimmy"—She sighed a little, after we took time off from the clinches—"he showed up late that night with Chivers, in that dinky little room you left me in in Michianopolis.

"They must have been right behind us all the way, paying all those people lavishly to say they'd never seen me, effacing my very existence so you couldn't make trouble for them later.

"But he fooled me, pretended he wasn't angry, said he didn't mind if I married and left him. And I was so sleepy and off guard I believed him. Then he handed me a glass of salty-tasting water to drink, and said, 'Come on down to the car. Jimmy's down there waiting for you; we've got him with us.' I staggered down there between them and got in, and that's all I remember."

Then she remembered something else and looked at me with fright in her eyes. "Jimmy, you didn't mind marrying little Alice Brown, but I don't suppose Alma Beresford would stand a show with you—?"

"You don't suppose right," I told her gruffly, "because I'm marrying Alice Brown all over again—even if we've

gotta take time off to change her name legally first. And this time there won't be any burning of the records.

"And this ugly-looking bloke standing up here, name of Ainslie, is going to be best man at our second wedding. Know why? Because he was the only one in the whole world believed there really was a you."

THE END

How to be History

FOR those millions of humble citizens who didn't get into the Time Capsule at the World's Fair (unless by way of the New York telephone book) there is more than adequate compensation.

Want to be dug up by historians and research workers? Take your diaries, letters, and old bills to the New York Public Library. There, in a special private document file, they will pack you away for the ages. Research material—get it?

So it gives an idea. The lads who never got beyond that first grim interview with the dean may now make a couple of easy trips to the library, and then return to their pinochle with the blissful assurance that they are helping some poor grind knock off a Ph.D. a couple of hundred years hence.

—Victoria Crosby

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You think that stuff in bottles can take your pain away? Perhaps; but the pain will be back. But as for me—look for me tomorrow, and I shan't be here. Nor anywhere . . .

By **ROBERT W. COCHRAN**

Author of "Bonus For Brawn," "A Tower of Strength," etc.

NOW I don't profess to know anything about metaphysics. I never gave the matter even casual consideration until I met Binks. Jerome Binks, apothecary, the sign on the plate glass window announced.

I had a headache like two riveting machines, or I wouldn't have gone in the musty-looking place. There was only one person in the store, and I knew as soon as I saw him that I was looking at Binks himself.

He had a big head, almost bald, and the type of forehead that falls definitely into one of two classes: as belonging to a genius or an idiot.

For one who practiced the art of keeping other people in good health he didn't look any too well himself. His skin was a tripelike yellowish-white, and he had decidedly too much flesh under it. His hands

were pudgy, shapeless things, like meat that has been cooked too long and is on the point of falling to pieces.

He was, in spite of his odd appearance, kindly—almost paternally so—when I told him of my throbbing head. With the precise carefulness of his trade he measured ingredients from three bottles—dry, floury-looking stuff—and carefully blended the whole with short, deft jabs of a pestle held in his stubby fingers.

This done, he divided the mixture skillfully and wrapped each of four parts in small squares of waxed paper. One he handed me. "Take this now," he said, and drew water in a paper cup and held it out to me. While I carried out his instructions he put the remainder of the medicine in an envelope and slid it across the glass top of the counter.

"Ten cents," he said. And then for the first time he smiled.

He dropped the dime I handed him into an old-fashioned cash drawer and said, still smiling, "It isn't worth it, really. Your

headache will come back again, but"—and his lumpy shoulders shrugged ever so slightly—"one must live."

I said, "Why?" It was almost a slip of the tongue. I hadn't meant to be smart or disrespectful to the man, and as soon as the word had left my lips I regretted it.

He looked at me and his pale eyes actually twinkled. He drew in a deep breath as if to smother my flippancy, and then he said, "A-h," very slowly and deliberately, as if he had pondered the question.

"The headache," he asked, "is it better?"

I was really surprised, for in that brief time the headache had disappeared completely. "The headache," I admitted, "is gone"; and I clutched tighter the remaining medicine in my pocket.

He smiled and said, "But it will come back. That is the way with headaches and sore throats, and rheumatism and chilblains. Now gallstones, or even an appendix, though I'm not sure about the appendix—but if it were gallstones I could do something really worth while for you."

MAYBE the medicine I had taken had something to do with it, but I thought at the time it was just sheer relief from the pounding inside my head; anyway, I felt like humoring the old man. I call him old; he probably wasn't more than fifty, but he certainly didn't appear middle-aged.

"Are you a surgeon as well as a chemist?" I asked, and looked at the unwieldy fingers.

He didn't answer directly, but walked across to where a bottle of ink and a pad of writing paper lay below the deep shelves full of medicine. He pulled a sheet from the pad and laid it on the glass top of the counter. It was almost transparent; I could see the watermark in the weave.

"Here, you do it," he said, and held the bottle of ink towards me.

"What?" I asked, and shivered when his cold fingers touched mine.

"Let some ink drop on the paper," he said, "Just a spot or two."

This is some trick, I thought, but anyway I followed his directions. The ink was deep blue, and stood out in three dark warts on the white surface. It would stay wet, I could see, for hours, because the paper was incapable of absorbing the moisture.

"Watch," he said, and I saw that he was looking at the beads of ink very intently. His face took on the appearance of a mask, an almost hypnotic stare appeared in his eyes.

I looked at the stains on the paper; they were still there. I brought my eyes back to the man's face. Perhaps it was only my imagination, but I seemed to feel a tension almost like an electric current in the air. I couldn't have left the shop had I wanted to; and for the first time in my life I knew the meaning of the word spellbound.

I dropped my eyes again to the stains on the paper. I saw a change, but for a moment I couldn't be sure of it. The ink was still there, the three little dots standing in relief above the smooth white surface. But as I continued to stare, the dark blobs seemed to merge into the paper white.

I closed my eyes for a moment and looked again. They were still there; their position, even their size had not been altered; but beyond a doubt I could see the texture of the paper through the dark coloring.

The pigment around the edges of the drops seemed to be the first to fade. There came a time, as I watched, when I could no longer detect the point of contact; and then, without perceptible change, I was looking at only an unmarked sheet of white paper.

I heard the breath come out of the druggist's body in a huge sigh, and I think that I sighed too, so great was my relief.

I held the sheet of paper between my eyes and the light that came through the front window, and there certainly was no mark upon it. I put it down and ran fingers over the smooth surface. It was not even moist where the ink had been.

"What's the trick?" I said, when I could think of no solution myself.

"Trick!" He was, I could see, hurt that I should accuse him of a trick. "There is no trick," he said, and turned almost angrily. He went into the back part of his shop, and for a moment I considered following him and demanding an explanation, but I decided against it.

After all, it was his show. If he didn't want to give it away, you couldn't blame him.

AS almost always happens, I put the envelope with the remaining powder in a safe place; and two months later, when I had another of my headaches, I couldn't lay hand upon it. It was a thirty-minute ride by street car, but at last, desperate, I went, remembering the almost instant relief that had come with the medicine.

Binks was still there. I wondered, as I entered, if anyone ever came to the shop; for, as upon my last visit, the place was deserted except for the proprietor.

I don't think he recognized me at first, but when I said headache he gave me a sharper look and nodded. "I remember," he said. "You were here once before."

With the same precise, deliberate movements he went through the process of concocting the medicine. Three of the little papers he put in an envelope, the fourth he handed to me. I tilted it to my lips and drained the paper cup of water that he extended.

I had told one or two people about the strange affair of the ink stains, and their ridicule at my gullibility determined me to try again to penetrate the hoax.

"I'm afraid," I said, "that I offended you the last time I was here when you showed me that—" I almost said trick again and caught myself just in time. "Peculiar power," I ended.

He looked at me, I thought suspiciously, and I said, "I'd give a good deal to be able to do that sort of thing myself."

"It's brought me trouble enough," he said, and his heavy face saddened as

if some great worry gnawed at him secretly.

I paid for the powder and watched him put my dollar in the cash drawer and place ninety cents on the glass-topped counter.

He looked at the money, moving it, each coin separate from the others, with his blunt fish-belly finger. "Do you want to see me do the same thing with this silver?" he asked—I thought a shade testily, like a magician who has been bothered too much at a charity show.

This was decidedly more to my liking. A druggist might very easily manufacture his own ink. Even the paper could have been treated in some chemical manner so that the ink would evaporate into the air. A silver coin, six silver coins, were certainly much more tangible. There was the added advantage of the glass counter. It would be next to impossible to remove those coins without some sound.

"I certainly would," I said, and was not averse to paying a dollar for the relief I was already beginning to feel.

Everything was the same as before: the same masklike appearance of the bloated, unhealthy face; the strange watery-blue eyes taking on again that impenetrable look.

I felt a second time as if I were being subjected to a small electric shock. The coins—the two quarters, the four dimes—seemed not to change as I lowered my eyes from the druggist's face in quick glances.

I wasn't sure how much time passed—not more than two minutes probably—before I saw that the thin edges of the ten-cent pieces were hardly distinguishable from the smooth glass on which they rested. They might have been painted, so slightly were the edges visible.

Then, while I was watching, the four dimes, like steam above a locomotive, disappeared altogether. I wanted to say something, but the two quarters still held my attention, and not until these too had entirely disappeared was I able to relax.

Binks sighed again, as he had sighed before: a deep, satisfying sigh that appeared to leave his body as completely

deflated as a punctured balloon. I rubbed a hand across the glass and looked at the thin trace of dust on my fingers.

It hadn't occurred to me before that Binks might have living-quarters in the rear of his shop. I heard a sound; at first I couldn't place it. Binks heard it too and said apologetically, "You'll have to excuse me, I must go at once." He didn't wait for my reply, but disappeared through the little door that was the only opening in the rows of shelves.

I heard the sound much more distinctly when he opened a door somewhere beyond. A woman was crying. The long heartbreaking sobs of a person to whom tears have become almost a religion.

I was surprised and disappointed at this unfortunate interruption; but after a moment I went on out to the street, determined to make another attempt to solve this strange mystery.

IT WAS perhaps three weeks before I took time on a drab, rainy morning, to go out to the little shop. I had spent several hours digging through books in the public library.

I had, it is only fair to say, found nothing quite so unbelievable as the things Binks had shown me. But on the other hand there was indisputable proof that certain religious fanatics in Tibet had been able, at least to their own satisfaction, to demonstrate the power of mind over matter. The result of my research was that I went back to the little shop halfway a convert.

Binks was not in the outer room, and I dared not intrude into the privacy of his home with no excuse for being there other than my curiosity to learn more from the man himself. I waited ten, fifteen, twenty minutes and then, boldly, I went behind the counter and rapped against the door casing.

I heard movement, and after a little time Binks himself came through the door from the rear of his shop.

"Oh, it's you," he said, but there was no friendliness in his greeting. He was, I

could see, a much older man than I had believed. His eyes had sunk into his head and he had lost almost all trace of vitality.

"Another one," he said, and reached automatically for the bottles on the shelf at his back. I was on the point of saying no; but since that was my only legitimate excuse for disturbing him I let him make up the little packages of medicine.

Waiting until he was all but done, I said I was leaving for a time and had called in only to get a supply of the powder to carry with me. I had thought of something as he had mixed the powder. That was possibly the answer, the headache powder. If I didn't take any from him, perhaps he would not be able to perform.

Without hesitation he put the four little papers in the envelope and dropped the dime I handed him into the cash drawer.

"You'll excuse me," he said; "I've had a terrible misfortune."

Well, I couldn't very well ask him to put on a show in the face of that remark, so I countered with, "That's too bad. Nothing very serious, I hope."

"My wife," he said without looking at me, "killed herself. We had the funeral yesterday."

I remembered the crying I had heard and I really wanted to say some sympathetic word to the stricken man, but I could think of nothing.

"It was my fault," he said, self-censure in his voice. "If I hadn't tried to help her it would have been all right."

I caught some vague connection between the disappearance of the ink and the money with this thing he was saying, and waited for him to go on.

"She had headaches," he said, "like yours, only worse, much worse. They tortured her for days, and it kept taking more and more medicine to relieve her. She persuaded me to work on it."

"I shouldn't have done it, I knew that I shouldn't. A headache is not substance, it is not matter—like gallstones, or a wart, for instance. I worked on it for a whole hour. You must understand once I begin

to concentrate on something I cannot stop until I have finished.

"That was more than a year ago, and yesterday we buried her."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Don't you see? Instead of removing the headache, I removed her entire mind. I never knew until it was too late. This whole year she has been an idiot. I did it. I thought there might be some way to bring it back, but I found none."

"This is incredible," I said. "You mean to say that you can by mere concentration of your mind remove anything that you wish? Where do the things go?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've tried it on cats when they yowl at night. Once I worked on a house for a man, but it was too fantastic, seeing the gaping hole of the cellar when I was through."

He stopped and stood staring at me, dull suffering in his eyes.

"Do you mind," I said, "if I write an article about this? It is really very amazing. It may be the missing link to the hereafter."

"I'm going away," he said, "I'm going far away. I'm sorry I can't accommodate you; I was making final preparations when you came just now. If you'll excuse me, I'll say good-bye."

He went back through the doorway and I stood looking after him. This was too big a thing to be left lying at loose ends. I decided to take a chance and went out to the street.

IT WAS not more than three hours before I was back. I had five companions. Skeptical, sneering, mocking at what I had told them, they nevertheless accompanied me.

The front of the shop was empty as usual, and asking them to wait I pushed through into the rear room and then on to where a door was partly concealed by a curtain. Receiving no answer to my knock, I opened the door on a shabby, poorly furnished sitting room.

I stood there an instant in the doorway, scanning the room.

There was a couch before a window, and someone had made a dim tracery of a man's fat body on the cover. "Binks," I said, and I saw, or thought I saw, the indistinct outline on the couch waver.

I felt for the third time that strange sensation of electricity in the air and remembered the thin, all but transparent outline of the coins on the glass counter. I ran forward.

"Binks!" I yelled again, and heard the approaching footsteps of my companions. The natural coloring of the couch cover began slowly to fade into being, and that other—that vague tracery that might have been a man's fat, pudgy body—disappeared.

"He's gone, what?" one of my companions asked with a smirk.

I ran a hand over the couch. I thought the covering still felt unduly warm to my touch.

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Bill Ridley's savage lunge
carried Tim to the ground

By
FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

The White Oomailik

A WHALING fleet composed of ships owned by both the Bannings and the Ridleys, old and bitter rivals, is ice-locked in the far North; and Tim Banning, a lieutenant in the Revenue Cutter Service, has been ordered to supervise the relief of the stranded men. Tim's job is an especially ticklish one because three of the Banning ships have just been given to him by his uncle, old Sulphur-bottom Banning; Tim must be careful to remember, in spite of Ridleys, his duty as a Government man.

Tim's companion on the trek north, is Mary Ridley, a lovely, resolute girl; and Tim is disturbed to discover that he is falling in love with her. But having reached the camp of the stranded men, Mary at once

takes the part of her brother, Bill Ridley, who, with the aid of one Scalzo, is doing his best to discredit his enemy Tim Banning. The reindeer supply caravan following Tim has been inexplicably delayed; food rations are short; and the stranded men are beginning to grumble at Tim Banning's discipline.

FINALLY, a crowd of the whaling men is stirred up to revolt by a mysterious man with a bandaged face. Tim agrees to settle the dispute with his fists; stripping off his Government uniform, he steps out to face the antagonist whom the men have selected for him. The man he must fight is Bill Ridley . . .

This story began in the Argosy for February 3

CHAPTER XXI

AUTHORITY OF FISTS

"COME in, Banning, I'm ready," Bill said. Stirring in him now was the hate bred by generations of rivalry between the Ridleys and Bannings; and there was something else—the savage determination of a squaw man to redeem himself in the eyes of whites.

Tim said steadily, "I'm not starting this, Ridley. I've taken the stand that the rations won't be increased. It isn't my business to attack men who disagree." He realized that some day this battle might be brought up before an investigating board. He did not propose to play the aggressor.

"Then here's what you're waiting for," Bill Ridley growled, and he came at Tim with a rush. Every man there was willing to swear Bill struck the first blow, but Tim countered only a split second later.

His fist laid open the flesh over Bill's cheekbone and started the left eye swelling. Then for an instant Tim's whole body seemed paralyzed, when Bill's fist sank deep into the pit of his stomach.

"Ahhh!" Brennan muttered through his bandages, "there'll never be a rougher fight in the North. Nor with more at stake—"

In the thick, drifting fog the circle of whaling men stood silent, unaware that their bodies swayed and raised in the tempo of the fight. Behind them was a crowd of natives, for the word had passed that two white *oomailiks* were settling something big—something important to everyone there.

Plumes of vapor burst spasmodically from Tim's mouth and met the vapor from Bill's. Each of them was

tired from days on the trail, but they were tough men, trained down to muscle, bone and hard flesh.

Tim saw his chance five minutes after the fight started and crashed his right fist against Bill's jaw. The man's legs buckled. He should have gone down, but he fell into a clinch. With both arms pinning Tim's to his sides, Bill staggered around, shaking his head to clear it.

The crowd gave way as the struggling men pressed against it. "Stand back!" Tyler shouted. "Give them room." He was breathing hard and his face was tight-drawn. He swung when Bill Ridley swung and guarded when Bill Ridley guarded. When Tim's punches went home, Tyler winced. And there were others unconsciously swinging, guarding and wincing.

Bill's knee suddenly went into action, and Tim dropped, carrying his enemy with him. The groin blow weakened him and the crowd yelled for the first time. "Get him, Bill! Finish him! He's through."

Tim drew up his own knees and half-lifted Bill off the ground. Then he heaved outward and broke Bill's grasp. Sensing weakness in his enemy, Bill rushed in to finish him. Again Tim's legs doubled up. He drove them out with all of his remaining strength, caught Bill with his feet and knocked him backward.

Tim got up, swaying on his heels, drawing broken, rasping breaths. Sweat and blood half-closed his eyes. His fawn-skin shirt hung in shreds about his waist. His chest and stomach were covered with ugly red blotches where Bill Ridley's fists had driven deep. He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands and spat blood, still gasping.

Blurredly he saw Bill Ridley coming toward him; he saw the ring of eager,

distorted faces framed by parka hoods. Someone muttered, "They've been at it half an hour."

Bill's bloody, battered face was savage and his eyes had no fear in them, but the fury of his attack had weakened. He stumbled toward Tim Banning, and for just an instant the two of them stood swaying there, less than an arm's length apart. Their bloodshot eyes met, held; then their fists lashed out and thudded, and the two men summoned their last remnants of strength to fight with a blind frenzy.

Neither of them saw Mary Ridley break through the crowd. "Stop it!" she cried. "Stop, Bill—Tim. . . . Oh, somebody stop them!"

"Get out," Bill snarled.

"Get back, Mary!" Tim panted. Then Bill's fist spread his lips across his teeth.

Mary caught Tim's arm just as he swung at Bill's jaw. The blow went wide and threw Tim off balance. "Stop!" she cried again, clinging to the arm.

Bill Ridley saw his chance. He smashed his right against Tim's unprotected chin. Tim's feet lifted nine inches from the ground and he struck on his right side with stunning force on the frozen sod. The world became a blur of fog and fur-clad men.

BRENNAN and Tyler dragged Mary Ridley back. With an odd sense of detachment Tim watched her try to fight free. She kicked furiously and they held her at arm's length and let her spend her strength.

Tim had no memory of getting onto his feet. A fighting heart willed it and his muscles responded. He saw Bill Ridley rush in and stagger back. Vaguely he felt Bill's punches. His bruised ribs gave under the impact. He

saw Mary's frantic face, then Bill Ridley blotted out the rest of the world. Tim's head snapped back until it almost touched his spine. It went back twice more before he got his guard up.

He saw Bill's chin; he saw the wild eagerness in Bill's eyes. Bill was trying to finish him. Then Tim's fist drove out and he felt the bones in the back of his hand bend. He wiped the blood and sweat from his eyes again and looked down.

Bill Ridley was lying on his face. Tim stared at the man's flushed, beautifully muscled back and watched the muscles flex as Bill tried to get to his feet. Bill drew his knees up and straightened his arms, then the bones seemed to turn liquid in his body. He crumpled, rolled over on his back and stared upward with glassy eyes.

Tim Banning regarded him briefly, critically, then lurched to his cabin. He started to sit down to rest, and changed his mind. He knew he wouldn't get up again, and the job wasn't done. He ripped off the shreds of his shirt and buttoned his uniform coat around his aching body. Then he jammed the cap onto his head and staggered out.

Briefly Tim gazed at the silent whites and natives. He wiped off his bruised lips and tried to control his labored breathing. "You men," he said huskily, "will return to your quarters."

He watched the ranks slowly break; the men who respected the uniform and the men who had learned to respect Tim Banning quietly returned to their quarters.

Tim Banning leaned a moment in the doorway, then he closed the door and locked it. He tried to reach his bunk, but suddenly his strength left him. The last impression of fading consciousness was the crash of his body on the cabin floor.

CHAPTER XXII

RIVER OF REINDEER

TIM slowly regained consciousness.

The memory of Bill Ridley's amazing strength and unexpected courage astonished him. His whole body ached and he was weak from nausea. He pulled himself to a chair and sat down, resting his battered face in his hands.

Voices filtered through the thick cabin walls. "When Mary grabbed Banning's arm and left Ridley an open-in' I thought the fight was over. I didn't think the man lived who could get up after a wallop like that," one said.

"The fight was over," his companion answered. "Bill knowed he'd shot his biggest gun. He knowed he was licked."

"But he'll get even. After a white man's been married to a native awhile he kinda picks up native idears on revenge," the first said. "Some of these fine days you're liable to find Banning with a knife sheathed atween his shoulder blades. I ain't heard a sound in that cabin, maybe he's cashed in."

Tim walked over to the window, forced it open a crack and said, "I ordered everybody to their quarters."

"Yes sir," they answered in unison. "We just wanted to find out if you was all right."

Several minutes after they sauntered off a knock disturbed him. "Open up, Tim," Mary ordered.

"I'm in no shape to receive visitors, Mary," he answered.

"You need some attention, though," she insisted.

"All right," he agreed.

She came into the cabin, pulled off her parka and rolled up her sleeves. "I've just sewed up a cut over Bill's cheekbone, and patched him up in half

a dozen other places," she said dryly.

"And now the Ridley nurse patches up the enemy," he said, trying to grin and making a bad job of it.

She frowned. "It was all so senseless. One of our men overtook us on the trail and said there was a mutiny brewing. Bill said, 'That's my chance!' I tried to stop him, but I couldn't. So I followed as fast as I could."

"And tried to stop me," Tim interrupted. "That wallop he gave me nearly settled it. I've been in a few brawls, but I was never hit like that. It proves one thing—Bill has quit the homemade whisky or he couldn't have stood up the way he did."

"But it's only made things worse," she insisted. "He'll never forget, nor forgive—"

"That's not the important thing, Mary," Tim told her. "The men here were getting out of hand. Someone, I don't know who, worked them up. They're half-sick, under-nourished and on edge. It needed only a spark to inflame them and that spark was supplied. Until Bill got into it, I tried to remain impersonal. I would have fought Tyler with no feeling whatever."

"Then there was feeling when you fought Bill?" she asked.

"There had to be," Tim answered. "As Bill said, the fight has been brewing a long time. And there's another element you've overlooked. When Bill was drunk most of the time, he didn't realize what it meant to be a squaw man—didn't care. Sober, he realized it; he felt the contempt some of the men had for him."

"This looked like a chance to redeem himself. I think, too, he had noticed there was more loyalty among the old Banning whalers to me, than there was to him among the Ridley men. And then, he saw in this mess a chance to

turn the tables: discredit me and—"

"And he took it and lost," she said bitterly.

"NO MAN who fought the way he did ever lost," Tim said quickly. "Whalers will talk about it for years. They won't put 'squaw' in front of his name any longer. But the important thing is, the fight was a kind of outlet for the trouble that was ready to burst in this camp. Fighting Bill, I managed to convince the men that Government authority still holds here."

"Are you sure of it?"

"So sure of it," he answered, "that I'm leaving on the long postponed hunt for the reindeer at once."

"But you're in no condition to travel, Tim," she protested.

"If I can't whip myself into shape after a rough-and-tumble battle," Tim replied, "then I deserve to leave my bones along the way."

Mary set to work, then, to doctor Tim's innumerable cuts and bruises. "I suppose you're right about the fight," she said thoughtfully. "I suppose it acts as a relief—an outlet. The men were dangerous, like snarling dogs. Their faces watching you fight . . .

"But I thought it was a blood-letting that could only end in general blood-letting. You mustn't let them get out of control, ever. And I'm going to see to it Bill backs your hand until they're fed. And I'm going to help you."

"You've helped from the first, even if Ridley's whaling interests did bring you here," he replied.

She had almost finished her job of repairing the damage her brother's fists had wrought. "Nature will have to take its course now," she said. "A few raw steaks might work wonders, but—"

"If we had raw steaks we wouldn't be applying them to black eyes," he

said. Moving stiffly about, Tim began throwing his trail gear into a heap.

"A team from one of our whalers east of here will arrive tomorrow," Mary told him. "I'll leave orders for it to pick up the fresh meat you're sending to the *Polar Night* and the *Mary Ridley*. That will free my own team. The meat can be cached until it's picked up. Suppose you start now? I should overhaul you within six or eight hours."

"All right," he agreed, "but I'll lash my sleeping bag and a few pounds of grub on a light handsled. There's always the chance you may be delayed. Fortunately, it isn't snowing. My trail will be easy to follow."

SEVEN hours later Tim looked back and saw her coming—a speck that grew larger as she sped down a gentle incline behind her dogs. She came to a stop with the brake biting into the crust and the dogs' breath pluming rapidly from gleaming fangs.

They camped briefly that night and the next, each morning hoping for clear weather, but the fog hung on, a gray, dismal shroud. Shortly before noon the third day the lead log turned sharply from the southwesterly course that Tim had worked out with a view of intersecting the reindeer's trail.

"Haw!" He bellowed in an effort to swing the leader back to the left "Haw!"

Other dogs began to whimper eagerly. Nothing short of a whip would turn the leader now. "There's a breeze," Tim said, "This blasted fog may blow back over the ice where it belongs. And we're downwind of anything that may be ahead of us. I'm going to let the leader have his own way for a half hour."

The team dipped, then climbed a ridge. The fog was thinning and a

cross-current was moving the mists from the flat beyond. Tim halted the team and silenced their eager whimpers. "Hear anything?" he asked.

"No, but I think I see something—over there! Coming out of the fog. Tim, it's the reindeer! The dogs scented them. They're almost to Barrow, Tim. Almost there!"

Three plodding creatures emerged from the fog, then the gray shroud rolled back and on they came, a stream of deer flowing slowly northward. Here and there a wobbly fawn followed its mother.

Tim viewed the scene with a mixture of emotions. Oddly he felt no sense of personal triumph. Rather it was a triumph for the Revenue Cutter Service and the thoroughness of its organization; a triumph, too, for the native herders.

"We'll go down and have a talk with Sheedy," Tim said at last. "Then we'll go back to Barrow and tell them the good news."

"The settlement will go mad, Tim," she said excitedly. "I hope they pack you all over the place on their shoulders."

"You don't suppose they'd do it?" he asked in alarm.

"Nobody, not even you, can stop them," she assured him.

"Then I'm going to trail the herd," he said, "and let the deer and their herders take the cheers. That part of the job is finished."

He looked toward the retreating fog bank beyond which lay the Arctic. Mary Ridley guessed his thoughts. Up there were Ridley and Banning ships trapped in the ice.

Tim Banning, whaling man, with his loyal crews could achieve wonders in an effort to salvage his *Audacious* and the whalers owned by Sulphur-bottom

Banning. But Lieutenant Banning must forget his love for the *Audacious*, he must force himself to go impartially about his job of aiding Banning and Ridley craft alike.

Tim would have been smart, Mary thought, if he had left his resignation effective when the deer arrived at Barrow. But that wouldn't have occurred to a revenue cutter man.

"Yes," she agreed, "the deer part of the job is finished. The hardest job is ahead."

CHAPTER XXIII

LIEUTENANT, HERE'S YOUR MEDICINE

THERE was good grazing land south of Point Barrow, and Tim Banning broke up the reindeer herd and left the larger portion there. The animals required for immediate use were segregated. Fawns were appearing in increased numbers and Tim was elated. The fawns would supply food in case the *Aurora* failed to reach Barrow and the shipwrecked men faced another winter.

"Who is going to take the small bunch into the settlement?" Mary Ridley asked. "All of the Eskimo herders have been eyeing you hopefully. They know how much excitement there would be at their arrival, and they're eager as children."

"The deer are safe here," Tim answered. "I'll let 'em all go. The boys deserve it. What do you think, Sheedy?"

"It was a long, hard trek," Sheedy answered, "and we were delayed by storms, wolf attacks and detours we had to make to locate good grazing grounds. But not one word of complaint came from any of them. Let the boys have their moment of glory."

Tim waved the herders toward the small bunch. "Take 'em in, boys," he ordered. Grinning broadly, they hurried to obey. Mary, Tim and Sheedy followed.

A mile from the settlement Tim stopped. "What are your plans, Mary?"

"Our trails fork here, Tim," she answered. "I'm going to put in my full time doing everything possible to protect the Ridley investment. The deer are here now."

"Of course," he agreed. "My position is different. My job now is to save property—stranded vessels. I may need your *Mary Ridley*. Except for my *Audacious* she's the most powerful ship in these waters. And from her position she'll be among the first to break clear of the ice."

"You can't have her, Tim," Mary quietly told him. "We can salvage our own ships. That's business. After that we'll do what we can for the Banning whalers—on a salvage basis, of course. I think our award will be half the value of the vessel and cargo."

"That's business, too," he observed.

"As long as lives were in danger," the girl said slowly, "we ignored the dollars-and-cents angle. But lives are no longer endangered. It's the old rivalry between the Bannings and Riddles again. No quarter asked nor given."

"The *Aurora* can't take all of the shipwrecked people out of the Arctic," Tim said. "My job is to save every possible ship, regardless of ownership. They're needed for transportation aside from their value as whalers. I have the authority to take over any available vessel for that purpose."

"And you will take the *Mary Ridley* by force?" she asked slowly.

"If necessary," he answered.

"That's going to cause you plenty

of trouble, Tim," she said. "If you lose the *Mary Ridley* in salvage operations, some people are going to claim that you took advantage of your official position to get rid of a rival whaler."

"I realize that, and I don't give a damn," Tim answered. "I've got a job here to do, and so far every move I've made has been dangerous. Up to now I've guessed right; I've been lucky. The job isn't going to get any easier or any safer—it may get tougher. So I can't afford to worry about anybody's talk. If I need the *Mary Ridley*, I'll take her."

"And I'll fight you to a standstill," she retorted, smiling. And looking down into her cool eyes, he had to fight down a sudden urge to take her in his arms.

"I'd expect nothing else from you," he answered. "Good luck. I'm swinging east on a tour of inspection. Barrow can get along without me for awhile."

"Good luck, Tim," she answered. She came close to him and touched his shoulder. "It's been good, working with a Banning. But from now on—no quarter asked."

"Nor given," he answered.

He jumped onto a sled Sheedy had used and the reindeer turned eastward with the usual burst of starting speed.

MARY waited until the reindeer were well on the way; then she slowly followed. Ahead, smoke lifted lazily from the settlement. She caught the peculiar odor of burning wood that had soaked long in sea water. Several dogs ventured forth and an alert native, seeing the reindeer, let out a yell.

Buildings emptied and fur-clad figures rushed about, catching loose dogs and hurrying them into igloos or chaining them up. At first a strange silence

gripped the crowd. Each man had lived within himself so long, it was difficult for some to emerge. They had talked and brooded and dreamed of the reindeer coming; and now, when suddenly the reality of their dream appeared before them, these men were caught in a kind of paralysis.

The reindeer moving slowly into the settlement became more than food. They were symbolic of final deliverance. Hopes had been lifted, then dashed when Surgeon Newton's small train had arrived. But this was no train.

Someone yelled—a strange, almost mad cry of relief. The others took it up, and then, moved by a common impulse, they raced to meet the herd—vigorous men and sick men who pressed their hands against their hearts to check the pounding; lame men who limped from the winter's ills, and others whose teeth were loose from scurvy.

The startled deer were corraled by a human fence that moved with them. The grinning Eskimo herders found themselves hugged and pounded on the back. Someone hoisted Sheedy on his shoulders and formed a parade.

A whaler appeared with an accordion, another located a native drum and a third ran up with a fiddle. A fourth nearly split his lip on a battered cornet. Tyler began singing in a booming voice:

*Please, oh please, oh do not let me fall,
You're my man and I love you best of
all,
And you must be my man or I'll have
no man at all,
There'll be a hot time, in the old town,
tonight,
My . . . baaaaaby.*

The band took it up and stayed through the song three times with an amazing lack of sour notes. Tyler doubled back and joined Mary.

"Where's Banning now?" he inquired.

"Yes, where is he?" a score chimed in.

"On an inspection tour," she answered. "He didn't even stop for a reindeer steak."

"I'm sorry," the trader said as he came up. "He's needed here."

"What is wrong now?" Mary asked.

"Oh, some of the men want to go pardners with the natives on whaling expeditions," he explained. "And that means trouble. I hope he will end all such talk." He shook his head gloomily. The normal life of the settlement had been thrown completely out of gear.

"Surgeon Newton arrived last night," the trader went on. "He is looking for Banning, also."

Mary found Newton in the cabin, making out a report. "I'm just finishing up," he declared. "I looked out and saw the excitement. Where's Tim?"

Again she explained. "What do you want of him?" she asked.

"I'm going to order a week's rest," Newton answered. "After all the man is a human being, not a machine. Drive! Drive! Drive! And everybody unloads their troubles on him."

"Perhaps he can coast along awhile," Mary ventured.

"Young lady," Newton answered, "you know damned well he can't. There are ships to be salvaged and—Ridleys to be fought. I may have to get stern with the fellow."

The surgeon put aside his report and went out to superintend the distribution of fresh meat, as well as the preparation of it. That was one load he could take off Tim's shoulders.

IT WAS three weeks before Point Barrow saw Tim Banning. It was now May and the sun which had thus

far offered little real warmth began melting the snow.

Water ran over everything and Tim put the men to work digging drains that would keep the houses dry. Waterproof boots were provided, and when the gum type was exhausted, he turned to the native *mukluks* with their amazing watertight seams.

Torrents of melting snow flowed down to the sea ice and converted the mass into slush and water. Tim knew this was but the beginning.

The small streams breaking through would cover the sea ice for a distance of three or four miles from the shore. Here the water would remain until it melted through the thin spots and drained off, leaving the sea ice clear.

The general breakup would follow.

Surgeon Newton gave Tim several days to settle problems that had cropped up during his absence, then he appeared, flanked by Sheedy and Tyler.

"What's the meaning of this?" Tim demanded as they entered without knocking.

"Doctor's orders," Newton answered. "I've tried for weeks to get you under my professional thumb. Now I've got you where I want you. Pick up his things, boys, and if he won't come peacefully take him by force and I'll assume full responsibility."

"Now, Doc," Tim argued, "you know how it is—"

"Exactly," Newton said quickly, "I know how it is! As you know, I don't care a whoop for you personally. If you want to kill yourself with work, that's all right. Ordinarily I'd lash you up in skins, rig up a platform and give you an Eskimo funeral, but I'm responsible for the Overland Expedition's health and you're the leader. I can't take chances."

"Give me another week, Doc," Tim

pleaded, "and I'll knock off. I never felt better in my life."

"Tim, you're a liar and you know it," Surgeon Newton declared. "You don't feel up to snuff and you won't knock off in another week. You've been giving orders and making everybody jump for months—now you're going to jump."

"Stop the nonsense, Doc," Tim growled. "This has gone too far. I thought you were a friend of mine."

"Never mind friendship. That doesn't enter into it," Newton retorted. "It's a Government surgeon speaking. Take him away, boys."

And they took him away, while whalers along the trail grinned. A northeast wind was blowing, reminding him of the icy blast he had fought day after day in the trek northward. Mary, as usual, was in his thoughts. He hadn't seen her in nearly a month, but he knew from reports that the Riddleys were preparing their ships for the struggle to come when the ice moved.

A reindeer, dragging a sled over ice, snow, green grass and patches of bare ground, followed. Eventually Newton stopped at a newly built camp. There was a tent containing a stove, ample fuel and plenty of food.

"There's a cot," Newton said, "Undress and go to bed."

Grudgingly Tim admitted the doctor was right. He was dead tired. As daylight was continuous, he had no idea of the time he slept. He woke up with a dull headache and a grouch against the world. The northeast wind was still blowing, but he caught the odor of roasted reindeer steak—or was it reindeer? It was roast something.

Newton, hearing him stirring about, poked his head into the tent. "Does it smell good?" he asked.

"Great!" Tim answered. "Let me

at it." He began dressing. "I'm ready for work again. This rest has done me good."

"Then you're going to get more of it. I searched the camp for this meal. It's roast wild duck, tinned vegetables and an apple pie. An item here, an item there and the work was done."

Tim ate slowly, thoughtfully, and then smoked. When Newton saw his patient was getting restless he got out a pair of shotguns and a hundred rounds of ammunition.

Tim followed him a short distance to a blind. An almost continuous line of eider ducks was flying over the blind.

"The fish supply at Barrow is exhausted," the doctor said. "Go to work, Tim. But make play of it."

"Good Lord!" Tim exclaimed. "I've been promising myself a duck hunt for years." He picked out a big drake and fired. Feathers floated in the air and the doctor fired. The drake tumbled to the tundra. "Sorry, Tim, that I had to wipe your eye, but it proves what shape you're in."

"You'll not wipe my eyes again," Tim declared. He slipped another shell into the barrel and made a difficult double. "That's three ducks for the pot." Then he reloaded.

NATURE'S lavishness was incredible. There seemed no end to the flight, and at times the sky was dark with ducks. Occasionally the wind shifted and the flight changed, but there was always a duck or two within range.

Tim shot daily and men from the settlement came and packed the game to a big ice-house used for preserving meat. While some of them cut and stored ice, others roved the tundra, gathering eggs which they ate in vari-

ous styles as long as they remained fresh.

A physical improvement in the men was evident, and a beam of approval replaced Surgeon Newton's worried expression. In ten days time Tim had shot nearly a thousand ducks. Petty problems no longer concerned him, but his concern over ships in the ice failed to lessen.

He struck camp several days later and moved into the settlement again. Natives engaged in their annual whaling were beginning to bring in meat and bone and were less inclined to look to the White Oomailik for food. On the surface matters looked fine, but Tim wasn't forgetting this was a fool's paradise. The Arctic was trying to lull him into a sense of false security—to trick him into lowering his guard.

Surgeon Newton greeted him warmly. "You look more like your normal self now. That's the trouble with all of you strong men—you think your strength and endurance are limitless. What's the next thing on the program?"

"A Fourth of July celebration," Tim answered. "The best food we can find; sports, and a midnight baseball game. Sheedy, Tyler and you are the committee to arrange all details. We'll make it a real celebration. Understand, a real celebration!"

"It'll be the greatest celebration the Arctic has ever known," Newton promised.

CHAPTER XXIV

DISASTER ICE

TIM BANNING barged into the doctor's quarters the evening of July 3rd. "It looks as if tomorrow would be a great day," he announced. "The wind has shifted to the southwest

and we'll probably get an early break-up."

Surgeon Newton realized what that meant. The entire pack would begin to move and probably jam into stranded pressure ridges, behind which certain of the whalers had been forced to take doubtful refuge. If ridges carried away, or ships were squeezed between contending floes, it meant instant destruction. No man-made thing could survive.

Surgeon Newton joined Tim at a chart which gave the location of each vessel. Circles marked the points where the Banning whalers, *Aleutian* and *Wanderer*, had gone down the previous fall. The two, with the *Audacious*, comprised the three ships which foxy old Sulphur-bottom Banning had sold to his nephew for one hundred dollars when he had heard they were lost. Tim had placed a question mark on the great floe which held the *Audacious*.

The *Pearl*, *Bangor* and *Elsie* were also Banning ships, but they had survived the fall crush, and Sulphur-bottom had retained title. Tim would rescue them with a mixture of emotions. The position of each was designated by name, as were the Ridley whalers, *Mary Ridley*, *Endeavor*, *Polar Night*, *Ranger* and *Susan R*.

"The Ridleys' *Endeavor* will catch it first," Tim predicted. "I advised Bill to remove her cargo and gear to a safe place on the beach. But he wasn't taking advice from me. He was sure the ridge would throw back any ice coming that way."

Tim made up a crew from the unattached men and started for the scene, followed by most of the settlement. The party made its way overland as the sea ice was rotted and honey-combed. It was unsafe when not actually impassable.

Bill and Mary Ridley with several of their whalers were already on the beach when Tim arrived. It was the first time Tim had met Bill since the fight. He nodded and said, "Hello, Ridley."

"Hello, Lieutenant," Bill answered and again he emphasized the title, as a warning to remain impartial.

Mary smiled, a trifle sadly, Tim thought. She doubtless realized the ice had decreed the *Endeavor's* doom. He studied the faces of the Ridley whalers, speculating on the coöperation he would get in an emergency. Brennan, the man with the bandaged face, was with them, which surprised Tim because he had not known Brennan had left the settlement.

"What's he doing with your men, Mary?" he asked.

"He has an idea there are doctors in San Francisco who can graft skin where his face was frozen and restore his handsome appearance," Mary replied, with a trace of amusement. "I suppose a man may be vain even where there are no white women. He shipped on the *Mary Ridley* for the return voyage."

Tim looked at the ice again. "I am taking charge, Mary, and will order the *Endeavor's* cargo sent ashore.

"That ridge will hold the pack back," Bill said, but he made no effort to resist Tim's assumption of complete authority.

Tim detailed several Banning men who had had experience in wire ports—ports where ships discharge over cables secured to the beach—to set up the necessary rigging. Members of the *Endeavor's* crew got up steam in the deck boiler and tested the winches.

The ice moved slowly, the men swiftly, and presently the first sling-load of bone sped through the air and

landed with a thud on the beach. In the distance the growl of the pack increased in volume. The wind was moving the free ice toward the shore ice, which in many places extended several miles.

The ridge protecting the *Endeavor* ran for miles, seemingly an icy bulwark firmly anchored to the bottom. Nevertheless Tim went into the rigging and studied the ridge through glasses.

The flocs made a breach three miles away as the ridge lifted high, broke up and fell back, then lifted again. The strength of the pack moved thousands of tons of shattered ice onto the beach and then finding resistance, shifted the attack. Abruptly a second breach appeared less than a half mile distant.

"All hands ashore!" he ordered. "Lively now. Don't stop for anything."

BEFORE the first man could go over the side, the ridge directly abeam buckled. Ice between ship and shore exploded with a cannon-like report. The *Endeavor* was trapped; the heart of her cried out as knees and beams buckled under a pressure no man could calculate. Then the ridge was pouring down on her like a breaking sea.

Men leaped into the rigging, for it was every man for himself, and clung desperately, ready to shift instantly to any point that offered anything approaching security.

The ice moved, slowly, and crumbled against the hull. Yet as it crumbled, it lifted the schooner clear of the water and sliced off sternpost and most of the keel, then stove in her quarter and piled the battered craft on the beach.

"Bill Ridley won't love you for predictin' what happened," a Banning whaling man observed, "and he'll hate the ice for makin' your prediction come true."

"He could have been right," Tim answered. "You can't count on anything in the ice but a fight. Fix up your wires and get the cargo to a safer spot. The pack may throw her over on her beam ends, then crush her."

He joined Mary again. Bill Ridley had moved off to nurse his bitterness. "Sorry," he said, "but that may be the story of every whaler that's trapped. Your whalebone will be saved, and with the shortage and high price sure to follow even a partial destruction of the fleet, it will help to cover the loss."

"I suppose so," she answered. "It isn't that we can't stand the loss, it's . . . well . . . I don't know."

"Men build a soul into a ship," he said.

"The groan of the breaking timbers and the scream of the bolts was almost human," Mary said.

"We'll hope the other vessels fare better," Tim said. "To aid them, I'm afraid I'll have to take over the *Mary Ridley*."

"No, Tim," the girl said resolutely. "You can't take her."

They were interrupted by a sudden crash as the *Endeavor* rolled over on her beam ends. The foremast snapped off twenty feet above the deck and clattered to the ice. As the wreck settled in the shattered ice, a man named Jenner who had shipped on the *Audacious*, ran up. He was breathless, and he carried a telescope under his arm.

"The *Audacious* is comin' in again, sir," he panted. "I got up in them cliffs. If the field turns like it was on a pivot, she may be thrown up on the beach—"

"And crushed," Tim cut in.

"If it don't turn, we could blast her out," Jenner hopefully suggested. "She's worth more'n all the others put together if you leave the *Mary Ridley*

out of it. Any Revenue Cutter man in your place would work first on her, sir."

"Thank you, Jenner," Tim answered. "I'll run up and have a look." Tim borrowed Jenner's glass and made his way to the highest point in the vicinity.

The *Audacious* was little more than a speck in the vast icefield, but there was no mistaking her outlines. Dark streaks with ragged edges breaking into the white marked the beginning of leads, and he saw by the change in the general tone of the sky that there was open water in the distance.

"But that doesn't mean the *Aurora* will arrive this week or this month," he mused. "There's plenty of ice on both sides of Point Barrow."

Tim returned to the *Endeavor*. She had apparently found solid ice and was in no immediate danger of breaking up completely. The pressure was lessening. He selected men who had served the Bannings well in the past, and ordered them to follow him.

"So you're going through with it, Tim?" Mary asked as he started toward the *Mary Ridley*.

"I need the *Mary Ridley*," he answered. For the first time he noticed the whaler's crew had quit the crowd and apparently returned to their ship.

"You'll have to take it by force," Mary told him. "I warned you repeatedly you couldn't have her."

CHAPTER XXV

MISS ALASKA HAS A GUN

THE *Mary Ridley* lay seven miles from the *Endeavor*. Tim organized a force of men and arrived within three hours after informing the girl of his intentions.

A grim line of whalers lined the

vessel's rail. Some were armed with revolvers, others with belaying pins and capstan bars. Mary, defiant, stood at the head of the gangway with a revolver. She was ghostly white, but determined.

"Hell!" Tim growled. His eyes roved over the men. Bill Ridley had taken a stand on the poop and was gripping a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun.

He walked slowly up the gangway, backed by his men. "Don't make me shoot, Tim," the girl pleaded in a low voice. "You know I will if you come aboard."

Tim stopped and looked at the Ridley whalers again. Brennan, with his face freshly bandaged, stood in the center, holding a capstan bar. Tyler was nearer, cold and resolute. In a few minutes some of these men would be dead as well as some of his own, Tim thought.

He said coolly, "The *Aurora* will be in the Arctic within thirty days. When she arrives, any of you who resist me now will be held for trial. Think it over."

"Go ahead," a man behind Tim whispered. "I know women. She won't shoot. Make her lower the gun by walking into it."

But Tim knew how Mary would suffer if he compelled her to weaken. He looked at the men again. Some of the resolution was leaving their grim faces.

"We're in a bottle," Brennan said, "and to get out we'll have to pass through the neck. The *Aurora* will be waiting at the neck. Maybe I'm a yellow dog, but I've no stomach to face Uncle Sam."

"You're a yellow rat," Mary snapped.

Tim was amazed at aid from this unexpected source. Up to this moment

his every instinct had warned him Brennan was against him, and yet he could recall nothing the man had done to cause the slightest trouble.

"Rat I am, then, Miss Ridley," Brennan said in a tight voice, "but I've a healthy respect for Uncle Sam. If Banning will take off that uniform and make it a fight between Bannings and Ridleys, I'm with you."

"I'm not taking off the uniform," Tim announced. "The Banning-Ridley angle was settled weeks ago." Suddenly he dived at the girl, knocking her gun arm up with his right hand as his left encircled her waist. The revolver cracked and the bullet went droning over the ice. Tim jerked it from her hand.

She squirmed desperately and looked over her shoulder. "Put down that shotgun, Bill," she said sharply, fearful now that her brother might lose his head completely.

Bill Ridley hesitated, then dropped the weapon. "All right, Banning, you win," he said. "But be damned careful you don't forget you're a Revenue Cutter lieutenant."

"I wouldn't put it past you to wreck the *Mary Ridley* and claim the ice crushed her. It'd be a Banning trick. And we'll see to it that every move you make is reviewed by a Congressional committee."

NO one knew better than Tim that there was better than an even chance of losing the *Mary Ridley*. And he realized, too, that before a Congressional investigating committee, the Ridleys might make quite a case against him in view of the long feud.

"Over the side with you, then," Tim retorted. "The ice is beginning to move and I want to get her clear."

"I call on everybody to witness this

ship is sound and dry," Bill Ridley shouted. "She hasn't been cracked and she doesn't leak."

"Pump her out," Tim ordered.

Several Banning whalers manned the pumps and found her bilges practically dry.

"It's admitted she's a sound ship," Tim said. "I'd prefer Ridley men who are familiar with her," he continued. "Those of her crew who will coöperate can stay aboard."

"I'll stay," Brennan offered, and several others lined up with him.

The engineer approached Mary. "I'd like to stay, miss," he said. "I hate to have a stranger foolin' with my engines."

"Stay aboard, please," Mary answered, "I know how you feel."

Then she went over the side, followed by Bill and the others who had not elected to remain.

Three hours later a charge of powder loosened up the ice so the vessel could crash her way into the lead. Just as Tim was about to cast off the lines which had moored her to the ice all winter, Bill Ridley came over the side. "Have you any objections to my coming aboard, Banning?"

"None at all," Tim told him.

"Thank you," Bill answered stiffly. "I'm a passenger, unless needed otherwise."

"Just as you prefer," Tim agreed. "Now what is his game?" Tim muttered to himself as Bill sauntered forward to watch the crew go into action.

The *Mary Ridley's* bows, sheathed in iron bark, smashed a channel through the mush ice and into the open lead. She seemed to shake herself like a waterfowl, then move steadily ahead. Tim skirted the pack and got within a mile of the *Audacious*.

"You can smash through, sir," Jen-

ner suggested, "and blast out a channel in three or four days' time. Then get a line aboard and haul her out. She's worth more'n all the others put—"

"I know! I know," Tim answered. "But I might lose the *Mary Ridley*. If the ice got over her and pressed down, instead of under and pressing up, she'd be smashed."

"Then put two or three of us aboard," Jenner urged. "We'll put her in shape for the big chance when it comes."

"And perhaps be carried into the Arctic Basin," Tim answered.

"Give us a umiak and a sled and we'll escape over the ice if things look bad," Jenner said.

"All right," Tim agreed.

Bill Ridley watched the three men go over the side and smiled mirthlessly. "You've got an excuse to take the *Mary Ridley* and attempt to save the men aboard the *Audacious*," he observed. "A smart move, Banning."

Tim sent the *Mary Ridley* in a general course for the *Polar Night*, and several hours later sighted the schooner. Ice had carried away her rudder and damaged the propeller. A huge floe was sweeping toward her at two miles an hour, ready to complete the destruc-

tion. A mass of ice blocked the *Mary Ridley's* way.

"Full speed ahead!" Tim ordered. She threw water back from her bows and plowed onward. A Banning sailor came from below, his face anxious. "What is it?" Tim asked.

"She's making water, sir—fast!"

"What?" Tim felt a sudden conviction that the same hand which had struck so often at the Overland Expedition might be executing a final blow. The *Mary Ridley* had not been put to any severe strain since leaving the ice. It was incredible that a seam should suddenly open. He ordered the steam pumps started and a steady stream of water poured from the bilges.

Tim said nothing, but his lips were tight. He ordered a slight change as he instinctively picked the weakest point in the ice. What happened in the next few minutes might affect his entire career. He stood to go down in disgrace after a Congressional investigation if he made one slip.

The heavy bows crashed into the ice, lifted slightly, then smashed downward, driving a wedge into the floe. Water in the ship rushed forward, then spilled back as the ship stopped. He could feel a definite settling astern.

"Man the handpumps," he ordered.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

USE SPEEDWAY DE LUXE BLADES
FOR FAST, SMOOTH, ECONOMICAL SHAVES



The Last Illusion

An Argosy Oddity

By JOHN AMES YORK

Author of "Thunderbolt,"
"Rest in Peace," etc.

The chief concern of this story is with a matter unpleasant: murder. The people in it are not like you and me and the main circumstance is abnormal. Readers who wish to be amused may save themselves six minutes by turning page.



GARDWELL had always been a thoughtless clod and the years had not changed him. If he had an iota of understanding he would have allowed Alex Champion to edge out of the U-Club bar that day and escaped unnoticed. It would have spared a life had he done so.

Instead he yapped out, "It's Alex, old Alex!" and came romping across like a big awkward dog to clout Champion's shoulder with one great paw and enclamp his fingers in the other. He towed his prize over to have a drink with the crowd, laughing down excuses.

They were celebrating with champagne. At three in the afternoon. Champion ordered a brandy-soda.

"Here's the boy," said Gardwell, the utter fool, "who would be riding high if there was any sense in this cockeyed world. Best man in our class, old Alex. You know Thurmond? And Vail?"

Champion knew them. Barton Vail had ignored the symbolism of Champion's *Blue Heather* and used his review as an exercise in wisecracks, killing the piece. Thurmond, the gray old goat, had sent word by his secretary that he would be pleased to discuss an additional advance to Mr. Champion as soon as the previous ones were repaid. Divornich, Haley, Riemann—yes, he knew them all. And damn them all for money-grubbing jackals!

"What are you doing these days, Alex?" Jake Riemann said. "How's the playwright business?"

Champion smiled and shrugged. "Same old grind," he said, and wet his lips with brandy. When he was gone old Thurmond would tell them that he hadn't written a decent thing in years. That even his WPA connection had cracked up six months ago when he lost his temper. In a little while some busybody would learn he was instructing flat-faced brats in a third-class boy's school.

His anger flared. "I'm teaching—" he began, and then he caught himself. "I am teaching myself some new

tricks," he finished, "and an old dog learns slowly."

Laughter. Thank you, merry gentlemen, for your nice polite laughter.

"We're whooping up the sale of my musical," Gardwell explained, as if all the morning papers hadn't carried the news of Hollywood's latest stupidity. Fifty thousand dollars for a piece of tripe like *Dancing Damosel*! "Come on and rally 'round. I want to talk to you."

"Sorry," said Champion. "Utmost importance. I've got to drink and run."

If Gardwell had let him nod his goodbyes and go on his way even then, the consequence might have been saved. He would have brooded for only a week or so and one day he would have found enough money for a big roaring drunk and nepenthe. But champagne bubbles and a fool must talk.

"But I want to see you, old Alex," said Gardwell. "Really I do. I want to use that brain of yours as I used to in the Workshop. We'll get together and cook something up—"

FOR an instant Champion was lost in his surge of rage. This puppeteer, this song-and-dance moron, this Tom-show boor, offering his gracious bounty to Alex Champion! To the groveling cur his noble lordship flingeth a marrowbone. "I want to use that brain of yours—"

His face may have shown his wrath. Perhaps he hadn't choked down the curse in his throat. Haley, Thurmond—they were all regarding him oddly. The silence was that afterrasps of steel teeth gnawing stone. Until his heel crunched down he did not know that the glass had spilled from his fingers.

"Sorry old man!" That was Gardwell, blundering and unaware. "Here, let's have another."

"No, no—really—"

He mumbled and turned away, and still he could not escape. Gardwell lumbered after him and flopped a big arm on his shoulder. Gardwell's pink-and-white face talked confidentially down.

"I know you don't like drinking crowds, Alex. I'd get away too if I could. But I do want to see you, honestly. We've taken a place at the Colfax—I'm married now, you know—and I'll be here three months. Come up as soon as you can. Come any time."

"Thank you very much," said Champion.

"Hell, boy," said Gardwell, "those years we roomed together were the best I ever had. The seeds of everything I've done were planted then." He checked his stride, frowning. "I hope you don't think that I'm—well, you know, that crowd in there. You don't think my success—that I've changed—"

"Do you still bring home stray dogs?"

"Well I—uh—now, listen, Alex—"

His blundering was the cure Champion needed. He managed to smile, maliciously remembering.

"You're still the same damn fool," he said. His eyes lifted. "You still have the same genius, even, for wearing pretty green ties with your nice blue suits."

Gardwell grinned. He fumbled with his cravat, looked down at it. "I would have sworn this was blue when I put it on," he said. He laughed. "See, Alex. I need you to take care of me."

Alex Champion endured the pressure of a handshake and agreed to call the Colfax next day. Yes, he'd try to make it for dinner. He walked out of the U-Club with most of his jangling nervousness gone. It had been a school-boy stunt, that tie business, but pulling

it off on Gardwell once more was a small measure of satisfaction. The tie, of course, was as blue as blue. And Gardwell was not color-blind. But Champion again had made him think he was, and it was pleasant to rule another man's mind, even in that trifling fashion.

His own chief trouble, Alex Champion decided, was that he put his keen mind into the brains of other men and thought their thoughts for them.

This was his mistake and he admitted it. Gardwell's blundering had driven that point home. Let Vail and Divornich imagine, if they choose, that Larry Gardwell had gathered another starveling to his breast. Let them cackle out the news. Gardwell was known as the softest touch on Broadway. In his college days he fed lean cats and splinted a sparrow's wing. Charity, a handout, brother-can-you-spare—well, damn them, *let* them talk.

The true, important facts were very different, and now Champion reviewed them in his mind. You understood Gardwell, none better. You had watched him sprout and grow. You had read his stage things and recognized how great a part of yourself was in them. Your influence—why, in that sense, *you* were the benefactor, for you had shaped the man's thinking. What Thurmond and Vail might think had no weight at all.

ALEX Champion dined at the Colfax and was persuaded to accept a loan. He met Ellen Gardwell—mouse-haired but pleasant enough—and liked the way she laughed at some of his casual vignettes. In the future, he decided, he would make more considered use of his gift of mimicry. It seemed to amuse the ladies.

It was pleasant, he found, to lounge

in the solarium as the afternoons waned and to roll good brandy over your tongue. You worked out some of your best lines there and those little pieces of business, those symbolic counterpoints which Gardwell could never devise for himself.

"Did you hear that, Ellen?" Gardwell would exclaim. "Can't you see that picture?"

Champion liked her small smile of comment.

She was a smart little thing. It was her money, as everyone knew, that had put Gardwell across. He had been directing some straw-hat group in the sticks before the marriage and no one would touch the stuff he kept sending around. Champion shrugged. Marry the heiress to half a million—there's your formula for fame.

Money makes money. Success breeds success. "This may be the push I needed," Champion thought. He had moved to a nearby hotel. His grub-faced scholars would see him no more.

From now on—

He sipped his brandy.

With money behind him any man could write. With a place like this for background, knowing the proper people, he could write the real and important things and put them over. All it needed was a little push.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. Champion?"

He stood and bowed. "I was admiring your sunset view, Mrs. Gardwell. How could anyone be uncomfortable?"

Her smile. "Won't you call me Ellen, please? I'd like to feel you are a friend of mine as well, for I haven't many friends, you know."

He spoke some banality as concealment for his pleasure and surprise. "It's like New York, this room," he said vaguely. "But tell me—do you

really like all this chromium and glaze, this glass and glitter?"

"I hate it," she said, still smiling. "It's much too sharp and hard. But well—you know—it's Larry's business."

Alex Champion was at his best when the crowd came for cocktails. He drank nothing at all, content with the inner exhilaration he inexplicably had.

"Same old Alex," Gardwell said. "This is how I like to see you."

Champion had not intended to do it again, but some insistence impelled him. He pointed down. "Better watch that loose shoelace, Larry," he said casually. "You'll trip and break your handsome neck."

"Shoelace? Oh, I didn't see—"

Like a dutiful pupil at teacher's command Gardwell knelt and adjusted a lace that was already knotted neat and tight. He stood and grinned. "What are you drinking, Alex?"

Where this strange business began and how it managed to develop Alex Champion did not pretend to know. It was in the last year at New Haven—both had been working hard on the Prize Competition—when Champion discovered this odd control he had:

He could make his roommate believe what was not real.

He had finished work this certain night, he remembered, and was watching Gardwell across the study able. He said idly, "Hank, the thunder!"

Gardwell's calf-eyes stared at him. "Huh? What's that?"

"The thunder," he repeated, joking.

"Oh—" Gardwell listened and nodded. "I guess I've been hearing it all the time and never noticed. I hope it doesn't mean a wet field for the game tomorrow."

It was quite amusing. Champion had intended to tell the story around and

had forgotten. Later he repeated the experiment.

ALEX Champion reclined in a streamlined chair and recalled other incidents. Sitting there, he was facing french doors which opened in from a small balcony, with the twilight city twenty stories below. To the right there were similar doors, closing off the hallway which led to the voices of the cocktail crowd. They were getting noisy now and Gardwell was leading the old college songs.

Champion closed his eyes an instant. He did not want to think but snatches from the past two hours were there in his consciousness: The push I needed, he had thought. . . . "You'll trip and break your neck," he had said to Gardwell. . . . And she had said, "Please call me Ellen."

He stood up jerkily. "Plotting another play," he told himself aloud. He managed to laugh. "Stick to your comedies, Alex, and forget the melodrama."

But the idea for this perfect melodrama was not easily forgot.

The chair that faced the twin french doorways became his accustomed seat. He was working with Gardwell on the new revue—a tawdry hodgepodge, really, though some of the small conceits were not bad—and when the afternoon stint was done Ellen would join them for a sun-room drink. In these moments of relaxation he could study Gardwell at ease.

Like most big men Gardwell was an extrovert. His whole being was there on the surface for everyone to see. When an idea occurred he yapped it out. When he had an emotion he frolicked with it like a puppy. Because he had no power of deep clear thinking on his own, he had developed a skill

in adapting the thoughts of better men. Here was the key to his success. And here too was the key to the strange game that Champion played with Gardwell.

"Yes," Alex Champion reflected. "That's how I make him believe these cockeyed things."

The doctors would have a name for Champion's mental control over the other man. Fixation, hypnosis, mind-over-matter. It was probably not at all unusual. Gardwell had always admired Alex Champion. He had grown to depend upon the incisive logic of Alex Champion's mind. Those instances of his belief in the unreal, each happening at a time when Gardwell's normal resistance was low, were merely triumphs of the quick brain over the sluggish.

Hypnosis was the word, Champion told himself. Some odd personal form of suggestion to which Gardwell reacted. Champion did not believe, of course, that he could fix his man with a steely glare and make Svengali passes, whereupon Gardwell would scratch his ribs and caper like a kinkajou. Nothing of the sort. But he had proved this odd control of his which made Gardwell believe—for a brief space only and then forgotten—that blue was green, that left was right, that false was true.

He could convince Gardwell, for example, that those two exactly similar french doorways were transposed. At the right time, with proper conditions, he could send Gardwell walking blindly out—

No. For God's sake, no! Champion straightened in the chair and rubbed his handkerchief between his palms. The thing to do was to take old Larry to some specialist and thrash it out. Or maybe talk it over with Ellen first and hear what she thought. He glanced

across at her and inspiration came. Let her see first what must be cured.

THEY had been sitting in lazy silence. Gardwell's long legs were stretched in the sun and his hands were clasped behind his blond head. Besides him was a small table with an earthenware jar of cigarettes upon it. Champion fixed his glance on the jar.

"Is that my drink there, Larry?" he said. "Will you pass it over?"

"Drink?" said Gardwell. Then: "Oh—sure."

Champion's stare had focused on the jar until he saw long fingers grip it. Now he raised his eyes to Gardwell's face and saw only blankness there. He took the jar from Gardwell and set it down.

"We're shy on ice," Gardwell said. "I'll go and rustle some." He went through the french doorway on the right, and into the hall.

Champion lighted a cigarette. His drink was on the rug beside his chair and he tasted it before he looked at Ellen. In her face he saw not puzzled surprise but only a calm awareness of what had happened. She knew—she understood!

"What's wrong with Larry?" he said. "Has he been a little jittery lately?"

She returned his look without expression. "He works too hard and plays too hard. He's not as strong as he seems, you know."

"Why don't you get him away for a rest?"

"Away—" She bit off the word as she stood. "Oh, damn him, I only wish I could!"

She left the solarium shortly afterward.

Champion sipped his brandy, alone in the bright room. If anything hap-

pened to Gardwell then Ellen would be alone. She hadn't many friends, so she said, and she would need a strong arm to rest on. Someone who understood.

Away—what did she mean by that word “away”?

Champion was staring at the french doors. One doorway led to the hall, the other to a balcony outside, with its railing not so high. Overwork—drinking—any man can make a small mistake. Champion considered each detail with care. He had his nerves and emotions in complete control and his plan envisualized clearly. Yes, the plan would work; it should be tried. He would stop Gardwell before it was too late, of course, and the shock of the accident so narrowly avoided might be the cure for him.

Yes. Of course. Better than any doctor.

He was watching the sun on the doorpanes when Gardwell returned with the ice. The tinkle of fresh drinks made a pleasant sound and the brandy was sweet to Champion's tongue. For a little while he spoke inconsequential. Then:

“Another day,” he said. “Beneath the sunset sun the city roofs forget their squalor.”

He directed his glance to the wrong doorway that opened on the hall. Gardwell's eyes followed his own.

“Can you see the tower clock out there from where you're sitting?” Champion asked casually.

Gardwell nodded. “Six-thirty.”

Alex Champion cocked his head. He seemed to listen. “Did you leave the water running yonder, Larry, when you got the ice? There—can't you hear it?”

Mechanically, again following Champion's eyes, Gardwell faced the yawning balcony doors. “Why yes,” he

said, “I'd better—” He stood up, big and gangling.

Alex Champion had been cool and exact until now. His mind had set the stage and his will had pulled each string precisely. But now his stomach was constricted and the twin doorways enlarged within his sight. Enormous they grew, and one was heaven-shining and one eternal back; they waited for this poor blind fool to choose between them.

Gardwell moved. His stride was long.

“I will stop him,” Alex Champion said loudly in his mind.

Another stride. Again. There was the balcony rail so near and Gardwell's grinning face turned back for you to see. Before you could shout his foot was lifting, swinging ahead, and your eyes saw happen what your brain could never believe. Through the rail and beyond his movement carried. He strode and strode once more, buoyed by the empty air and pacing his way on nothingness. Above the roofs he walked along.

“Gardwell—” Alex Champion cried.

He was on his feet and running toward the hallway doors. His hands were stretched before him and the quick tears in his eyes. “Gardwell!” he shouted, stumbling now. “Gardwell!” he screamed.

But Gardwell would not answer.

THUS and so it was done. Not a pleasant story, as was forewarned, nor is the rest of it:

The policeman who stood watch above the body in the street, warning the morbid away, had his face screwed up against the smell of death. A second bluecoat, notebook in hand, approached the sidewalk. “All right,” he called.

"Where's those two I was talkin' to, them from the apartment?"

"Here, officer—right here."

"Okay," said the policeman. "Now let me have the end of it again."

The woman was sobbing and clinging hard to the man.

"It was an accident, officer," she said. "He was sick, he'd been drinking—it was just a mistake he made."

"He'd suffered with this ailment for many years," the man said gravely. "Hallucinations—blue neckties were green, shoes untied, all that sort of thing. Why just this afternoon he mistook a cigarette jar for a glass of brandy. He's been doing things of this sort ever since we were in college."

The policeman shrugged. "You mean to say he got the two doors mixed up and just walked right out and over the balcony?"

"That's it," said the man. "We were sitting there with a drink, talking about the sunset, when all at once he thought he heard the water running in the kitchen. It wasn't running, of course. I—ah—"

"My husband was a fool," Ellen Gardwell cried. "For years he's been—"

"I suppose you'd call it some peculiar form of hypnosis," the man said

hastily. "A visual transposition, an intermittent short-circuit in the brain—"

"He was crazy," said Ellen Gardwell huskily. "You could see it in his eyes. Why should we try to hide it, dear?"

She gripped her husband's big arm and looked up at him. Larry Gardwell glanced across at the huddled body of his friend Alex Champion, and shrugged.

"Larry's always bringing home stray dogs to feed," Ellen said. "He's just a big soft-hearted fool. For years he's been pampering this egomaniac, this Alex Champion, pretending to hear thunder at Champion's command, agreeing it was raining when it wasn't. When he brought the man around to the apartment he warned me about his funny ways and we both tried to help him get a fresh start. We pretended we didn't notice his oddities.

"I came back into the room," she ended, "just as it all was happening. Alex Champion pointed to the balcony doors and said that water was running. Larry got up to pretend to turn it off. He walked straight down the hallway, of course, toward the kitchen. And suddenly, for no earthly reason at all, this Alex Champion just screamed out Larry's name and ran straight out and over the balcony."

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(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the in-

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Argonotes

VERY occasionally, when our correspondents made this corner uncomfortably warm, we have murmured unhappily to ourself about the Right of Free Speech. We never went any further than that, and now we're never even going to murmur again. You see, a gentleman has written in to congratulate us on supporting the Bill of Rights and to tell us that ARGOSY is a "truly American Institution." He has put us on our mettle; we see our duty clear.

Feeling proud and grateful, we turn you over to

WALTER J. FRANK

Habits, good and bad—I could go on and on, telling of the habits of mankind, for indeed are there many.

But I will just tell of one habit and only one. This habit is the most annoying one—of the reader of ARGOSY who picks to pieces the ideas born in the minds of the selected few geni of the pen who write stories to entertain those readers.

Isn't it silly and inane, for someone to pick up a story or sketch, just to look for typographical, geographical, historical or what have you, errors, with the brilliant excuse that, "they insult the intelligence of the readers"?

After all, the authors are not in school and the readers are not necessarily teachers.

The majority of readers care not a whit for details of exactness pertaining to this or that. We read the stories to get out of them what the authors intended we should—thrill, excitement, laughter or any of the several reactions that are ours.

Now, I am a faithful reader of ARGOSY. Have been for many years. Whenever I come to a story I don't care for, I skip to the next story.

I reserve the Argonotes to the last and I certainly get a kick out of the letters written therein.

All I can say is that in allowing space in the ARGOSY for Argonotes, you exercise the part of the Bill of Rights, where freedom of the Press and Speech is permitted, and ARGOSY is a true American Institution.

Being an American Legionnaire, I more than appreciate this. ARGOSY is to me, a great magazine and I love it. And all of the authors and artists are swell people. Thank you, for this privilege to have my say.

VALLEJO, CAL.

In answering advertisements it is desirable that you mention ARGOSY

5 A-2

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